

West Virginia Program Takes a Multifaceted Approach to Juvenile Opioid Misuse Prevention and Education

The preliminary 2020 fatal drug overdose data released by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) indicates 1,275 deaths, an increase from the 878 deaths reported in 2019. DHHR's Office of Drug Control Policy identified seven West Virginia counties in desperate need of intervention—Berkeley, Cabell, Kanawha, Logan, Monongalia, Raleigh, and Wood—and is aggressively supporting naloxone distribution and the further identification of areas of high need within the counties. Despite these efforts, Berkeley County continues to rank among the top 10 counties in the country for fatal overdoses,¹ with numbers surpassing those of the rest of the state and surrounding areas in neighboring states.

The effects of substance use disorder (SUD) are not confined to the individual who suffers from it. SUDs have a particularly large impact on youths involved in the families of those afflicted with the disorder. In 2020, more than 7,000 kids entered the foster care system in West Virginia, a 71 percent increase over the last 10 years. Experts have determined this increase is due to the opioid crisis and the removal of children from their home due to parental substance use and neglect.² The emotional trauma caused by family separation can have negative impacts on children's life prospects; one study found that 44 percent of children placed in foster care are arrested at least once, while the same was true of only 14 percent of children who stayed with their biological families.³ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2020, children in the 10- to 14-year-old age group saw a 90 percent increase in drug-induced deaths while youths in the 15- to 19-year-old age group witnessed an increase of 86 percent.

These staggering statistics led the Berkeley County Council, the Berkeley County Recovery Resource Center (RRC), and the Berkeley Day Report Center to stand in agreement that an increase in education about the dangers of substance misuse was desperately needed. The Berkeley County Council was able to secure grant funding from the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) in 2019, and as a

result, the Juvenile Opioid Treatment Intervention and Prevention Program (JOTIPP) began in 2020. Unfortunately, its launch coincided with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the effects of COVID-19 on communities around the country, the program's first year did not see much action, as all the schools' classes were being held virtually.

Ms. Nicole Robertson, JOTIPP's program coordinator, and her

team gained some ground in the 2021 school year by making their way into two high schools and teaching a total of 10 ["Too Good for Drugs"](#) lessons per school. "Too Good for Drugs" addresses the "why" of substance misuse. Topics include effective communication, identifying and handling emotions, relationships with other people and their influences, and goal setting and decision making. "We talk about building character and identifying the type of person we want to be and then making decisions that are in alignment with who we say we are," said Ms. Robertson. The 10-week program ends with students being introduced to a panel of individuals in recovery, hearing their stories, and then being given the opportunity to ask questions. Some of those questions can be very heavy: "Why do people choose drugs over their family?" or "How do you get over emotional damage caused by a person suffering from addiction?" Ms. Robertson stands by the effectiveness of this approach and felt that being in two schools just was not enough. The JOTIPP team wanted to reach as many youths as possible and was adamant about gaining buy-in. "I had several Zoom meetings with guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators. I went to the schools in



Ms. Gia Weil, Ms. Nicole Robertson, and Ms. Lori Proudfoot with JOTIPP in front of the RRC

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person, sent multiple emails to any entity that I knew dealt with youth in Berkeley County, educated myself on the resources available to youth that I could potentially partner with, and set up meetings with any of them that were willing to meet. I refused to take no for an answer," said Ms. Robertson. She shared her vision for the program with whomever would listen, and it gained momentum. "We were willing to go anywhere we could, and we worked our program around what the schools could make available to us," said Ms. Robertson. When some schools did not have the calendar space to accommodate such an extensive lesson plan, JOTIPP was able to pivot and customize its lesson plans to fit the needs of the schools' timelines and address topics that seemed most relevant with their students.

JOTIPP really began to pick up speed in 2022. The program made its way into all four of Berkeley County's high schools, teaching 10 lessons of the "Too Good for Drugs" curriculum per school. Of the participating students polled at the end of the training, 96.8 percent said they had a better understanding of addiction and 94.3 percent said they felt better equipped to handle being exposed to drugs and alcohol.

When JOTIPP team members were not in the schools, they were serving Berkeley County youth in other ways. The team sponsors a peer recovery group with boys from the Timber Ridge School, a residential treatment facility for juveniles who are justice-involved because of substance use. JOTIPP also leads a group within the Student Transition and Recovery Program, a reporting center for children who have gotten into trouble and are referred to the program for therapy, counseling, drug screening, and SUD education. In addition, a group for kids who vape meets weekly at one of the local middle schools to help educate them on the dangers of vaping and to provide a safe space for them to talk about what is going on in their lives. The success of this support group led other area schools to request the facilitation of similar groups.

JOTIPP also launched its first free half-day summer camp program for middle school-aged children in 2022. The camp offers outdoor games, gardening classes, crafts, and group games. The team also taught lessons in Berkeley County Schools' Summer of Learning and

Engagement (SOLE) Program, which is a completely free program for children of all ages in some of the area schools.

Ms. Robertson believes that bringing her lived experience to the table enables her to connect to Berkeley youth in a way that a teacher or an administrator may not be able to. "My goal has been to educate youth on substance abuse in a way that they would understand, provide a safe space for them to ask questions and share their thoughts, and hopefully encourage and support them in making better decisions than I did when I was their age," she said. She firmly believes that JOTIPP team members are reducing the stigma surrounding substance misuse and treatment and teaching youth how to handle the drug epidemic going on all around them. Recent statistics indicated that 59 percent of Gen Zers (ages 13–24) have not heard of fentanyl in counterfeit pills and that only 37 percent believe fentanyl is extremely dangerous.⁴ Ms. Robertson reported, "We are proud to say 100 percent of ninth-graders in all four of Berkeley County's high schools know about counterfeit pills and how dangerous fentanyl is. We are changing the statistics in our area for these kids."

Endnotes

1. Horwitz, Sari, Scott Higham, Steven Rich, and Shelby Hanssen, (2019, May 22), "Fighting Fentanyl," *The Washington Post*, retrieved August 31, 2022, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/national/fentanyl-epidemic-trump-administration/?utm_term=.82ff5270c281.
2. Rappleye, Hannah, and Brenda Breslauer, (2020, January 21), "'Love Over Everything': As West Virginia Struggles With Foster Care Crisis, Families Step Up," *NBCNews.com*, retrieved August 31, 2022, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/parenting/love-over-everything-west-virginia-struggles-foster-care-crisis-families-n1118851>.
3. Doyle, Joseph J., Jr., (2007), "Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effects of Foster Care," *American Economic Review*, 97(5):1583–1610.
4. Current Data, (2021), Song for Charlie, retrieved August 31, 2022, from <https://www.songforcharlie.org/data>.