

Youth Substance Abuse and Addiction in Central Iowa

2023 uVoice White Paper

Introduction

Funded by the Mid Iowa Health Foundation and the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines, the uVoice Youth Philanthropy Board facilitated by Community Youth Concepts is a group of fifteen students from the Des Moines Metropolitan Area. These students come together biweekly to identify health-related issues facing youth in their community, combating these identified issues through a grant-making process. uVoice members research community needs, develop a grant application, review responses to their request for proposals, and allocate grant funds to non-profit organizations addressing the health-oriented issues prioritized by uVoice.

Background

uVoice board members shared similar experiences across different schools regarding substance abuse, coming to the conclusion that addiction to various substances was prevalent among students. Each board member could share experiences with one, if not more, of their peers who abused substances such as alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, pharmaceutical drugs, and even hard drugs like methamphetamines. The board strongly agreed that not only was substance abuse a problem, but that the root of the problem is the lack of education received by students about the dangers of substances. uVoice students could relate to the normalization of substance abuse, whether it comes from social media, targeted advertisements to youth, or simply the peer pressure. Board members even noticed the conjunction of substance abuse and other issues like mental health, poverty, and eating disorders. Teens are using substances to cope with other significant issues occurring around them. Students also realized that even if they could recognize a problem was happening, they were inadequately equipped to find help. Through the initial research process, a staggering 11% of sixth graders drank alcohol—this statistic and anecdotal evidence pushed the board to look more into substance abuse and how drastically it has impacted youth in the Polk County area.

Community Needs Assessment Findings

This year to ensure that uVoice students were able to understand the needs and wants of youth, we conducted two forms of community needs assessments. Our first assessment was the expert panel. Then, as a board, we wanted to hear directly from the students, but understood that students may not feel comfortable with the idea of being on a panel with others who work in drug prevention. This provided us the opportunity to hear from many students across the Des Moines metropolitan area while maintaining their anonymity.

On our expert panel, we had three panelists: Associate Principal Sharon Campbell from Valley High School, Gabbie Ruggiero from Employee and Family Resources, Katie Miller from Orchard Place.

Following the initial expert panel, the uVoice students conducted their second form of community needs assessment—the survey. The students developed and distributed a countywide survey to over one-

hundred youth ages 10-18 to learn about the impact of substance use in their lives and within their communities. The results from these assessments were astonishing, and revealed many insights regarding the ongoing issue. Some of the most meaningful findings include the following.

- (1) *Individuals in-need of substance abuse treatment services in Polk County often have to be placed on a waitlist for 4 or more weeks.* The uVoice students learned that a large underlying issue in the community is the severe lack of staffing that can provide these essential services. This has prevented community members from accessing necessary treatment in a timely manner.
- (2) *While the majority of survey respondents indicated that they have received some form of substance abuse prevention education, only 10% of students believed it was effective.* This stark contrast in the available prevention education and the effectiveness compared to the emphasized the urgency to reevaluate current prevention approaches and education that is provided in primary and secondary schools.
- (3) *Of the uVoice survey respondents, 18% shared they have used substances to deal with other issues in their life. While, 58% have had a friend who used substances to deal with other issues in their life.* These results disclosed that substance use as a coping mechanism is relatively prevalent among the social circles of youth.
- (4) *Youth in Iowa, ages 10 or above, do NOT need parent permission to receive treatment for substance abuse prevention.* This demonstrated that Iowa youth have the autonomy to seek and receive substance abuse prevention treatment without parental permission, as the state allows them to access such services independently, likely to ensure timely intervention and support.

Discussion

After reviewing the data from the survey, the uVoice students were surprised to see the number of middle schoolers obtaining substances. Among the 109 students who participated in this survey, 40 students answered that they have had alcohol while 22 students answered that they have used an e-cigarette product. “Due to the young age students are obtaining substances”, students should be exposed to substance abuse education during their early childhood years. Furthermore, 82 students have received substance abuse education, but 50% said it was minimally effective. This lack of effective prevention education can increase the risks of utilizing substances causing harm to their health. Substances are also commonly used to battle other issues students may face. According to the survey, 59.6% of students have had a peer who uses substances to deal with outside issues. With this correlation, students often cope using harmful methods that can be huge risk factors to their health and mental wellbeing. Additionally, 11.9% have seen substances being advertised on social media with substance abuse being so normalized on social platforms, it poses a threat to the education being provided in schools.

Some key takeaways from the panel were learning how social media leads to an increase in substance abuse, and the resources schools and organizations have for students and youth struggling with substance abuse.

- (1) Principal Campbell talked about her experience with families who would not support drug usage becoming shocked when they find out that their student uses drugs due to the influence of social media.
- (2) She also reiterated that social media normalizes teenagers using certain substances, because they see their peers or role models using them online.
- (3) Katie Miller explained that a lot of youth start to rely more on the social aspect of their lives, causing them to turn to substances to cope with issues in their life.
- (4) Additionally, as youth witness their peers using substances, they feel a temptation that they should too.
- (5) Many social events also encourage the use of alcohol, such as the Super Bowl causing it to be normalized. On that note, schools are doing a lot to help minimize the usage of substances during the school year. They offer free counseling sessions for students struggling with substance abuse, as well as contact to other organizations to help families.
- (6) One thing that they do in order to prevent usage during the school day is the installation of vape detectors in bathrooms around the school because they are where students use substances the most. This helps increase attention and attendance in class because students are less likely to leave knowing that they might get caught.
- (7) Along with the schools taking action, Orchard Place, is currently the only organization offering youth substance abuse treatment services. However, with the expanding knowledge of the depths of substance abuse, we are hoping that more organizations will start offering more treatment services for substance abuse.

After obtaining information from our community needs assessments, we proceeded to create a grant application to send out that focused on the following:

- (1) Ensure there is adequate substance abuse education through middle and high school, including how to help those who are currently facing substance abuse, resources if they are suffering and not only teaching abstinence based learning.
- (2) Provide connections for youth to others in similar circumstances to receive emotional group support.
- (3) Increased accessibility or awareness of free, confidential treatment resources for all youth who are not comfortable with using their parents' insurance.
- (4) Provide programming that promotes relationships and communication to help families work together to find the best solution for the student.
- (5) Create a promotional plan using mainly social media and other strategies of your choice to ensure that youth can access resources and learn about the ways to reach out to your organization to receive help/assistance.
- (6) Capacity Building or Strategic Planning to help expand your organization's services to impact more students.
- (7) Increase community education efforts on youth substance abuse education and prevention, which could include but is not limited to businesses that sell substances to prevent youth access.

After releasing the grant application, we found that it was difficult to gain applications due to the lack of organizations in the Des Moines area that focus on substance abuse treatment and prevention. This

caused us to think outside of the box and search for and contact organizations ourselves. Following that we got six applications from various organizations in the Des Moines area.

Projects Funded

After receiving six grant applications, we narrowed it down to the four applications that best represented our mission. We then looked at the amount of funding each project was requesting, and tried to accommodate the requested amounts. After careful consideration, we reached an agreement on funding three out of the four projects we had narrowed down to.

- (1) The first applicant we decided to fund was Chrysalis Foundation. The Chrysalis Foundation, founded in 1989, is a public charity supporting the success of girls and women in the Greater Des Moines area. We decided to give them \$1500 in order to help fund substance abuse education in their after school program for 5th-8th grade girls. The project would directly impact 620 girls, and would indirectly impact around 1,000 through outreach.
- (2) The second applicant we decided to fund was Employee and Family Resources. Employee Family Resources is a non-profit human services organization that aims to help people manage life's challenges to reach their full potential. We decided to give them \$1000 in order to help educate youth through Your Life Iowa via the Be Prepared to Save a Life campaign. This project would impact around two thousand youth in Polk County.
- (3) The third and final applicant we decided to fund was Orchard Place PACE. Orchard Place PACE is a center that provides skill-building services for a diverse population of children, teens, and families struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues. We decided to give them \$2500 in order to help fund a new curriculum that would provide safe resources and education to encourage youth and families to ask for help and educate them of the dangers of substance abuse.

Recommendations

Today, we continue to see the overwhelming normalization of substance use among youth in our community, whether it be social media showing our favorite influencers' casual use of substances or entertainment media portraying the average teenager partaking in substance abuse at a party. This is not just a Polk/Dallas County-specific issue but something we can see globally. uVoice evaluates the need to reverse the normalization in our new culture. One way uVoice recommends the reversal to start is by simply creating consequences for the youth.

While talking to Associate Principal Campbell, she spoke about the necessary measures Valley High School has taken to prevent its students from using substances. For example, vape detectors are installed in every bathroom, vape detectors are in every bathroom, so there are consequences when caught using substances at school. Valley also takes one further step by including families in this conversation and showing how accessible help can be for parents and teens. This is not a one-and-done conversation--the consequences alter every time a student is caught, eventually leading to institutional help if necessary. These types of measures and conversations are exactly what we need to help desensitize substance abuse in teens all across the nation.

Another way is simply talking to youth. As previously discussed, teens have seen a normalization of substances, and many may not understand the risks or consequences of their actions. Those who have gone through using substance abuse as teens, may be the best teachers. They can discuss the toxic relation using substance abuse had on their life. Experts are also great ways for students to continue to learn about the negative effects of substance abuse, and start the reversal of information learned elsewhere. uVoice also believes that once there is more education for students regarding the negative side effects, students will want to enact change.

Social media may have helped the substance abuse problem we see today but it can also help reverse its effects. Email and flyers are not the most effective way to reach teens anymore. CTRLCare, New Jersey's Mental Health and Technology Wellness treatment center, surveyed 90% of teens on social media, meaning that social media is the most prominent way to connect youth to experts and provide up-to-date information. When issues teens care about are getting traction, teens are more likely to repost and share problems they care about with their friends and followers. And since we know that an overwhelming majority of teens are already on social media, there needs to be more social media campaigning on the adverse side effects of substance abuse.

Substance abuse isn't an issue that affects a certain demographic, but rather an issue that takes over a person's life no matter their age, gender, and race. It's an issue that isn't spoken about much because of its normalization in our society, but we urge you to think about how it is portrayed in our daily lives. We see it being normal that youth drink underage and use drugs, and it is shown as something expected by people in society. But the portrayal of this issue in the media actually shows how frequently it occurs in reality. Like written above earlier, this is not just an issue that we see in youth, but we also see it in adults as well. It may be easy to miss the signs of substance abuse in an adult because they are legally allowed to drink, but it is also important to realize that no matter the age it is just as easy to face the addictive properties of a substance. So we recommend learning more and educating others about the warning signs of substance abuse.

Warning signs can be tricky to spot, and there aren't many resources to identify the differences in a person's daily actions, health, and behavior. Even now we mostly rely on our own intuitions, but don't really fact check or make sure that what we are seeing should be taken seriously. One action uVoice recommends is to make sure that if you as a community member see or sense anything out of the ordinary, check to see if that falls under a symptom or a warning sign for substance abuse. It's better to be safe and act proactively than to regret it later. Also uVoice recommends that if you as a reader of this are in an organization that combats substance abuse or even an issue related to this like mental health, then please create small infographics that can be engaging and brief enough to keep a person's attention. Most of the time people only read paper infographics while sitting in a waiting room so if there is a location for your organization then keep these in places where people have to wait a long time and get easily bored so that it can prompt them to pick up something and read it. If you want a more social media targeted approach then we recommend posting on your page weekly about one warning sign, how to spot it, and how to talk to the person about it, and where to contact for help. Overall it is really up to you how you want to expand other's knowledge on this topic, but these are some small ideas to help get started.

uVoice recommends having engaging programs for youth facing substance abuse. As the board consists of youth, we know that some of the substance abuse prevention programs in the past haven't been as helpful or engaging, so having something interactive and fun for youth can help them learn more about the problem. To help youth who are already struggling with substance abuse, we recommend having resources for students where they can have one on one conversations about their concerns, and help talk them through their problems. We also suggest that if you are an organization please open up your client to other resources from different organizations even if yours doesn't offer it. This will help them be able to find the perfect help, and would help your organization to further help in their rehab process. If you are not an organization and just a friend or family member, then we recommend that if you are able and willing to listen then listen to them without expressing judgment and keep an open mind because it's difficult to know exactly what they are going through if you let pre-existing thoughts get in the way.

In 2022, more than 109,000 Americans died due to substance abuse. It is clear that there is an issue, but there are no effective long-term solutions yet. While talking to employees at Orchard Place, we truly learned how substantial the issue was, yet the resources still aren't there. If we understand the problem exists, why aren't we putting all our resources into fixing it? In the entire metro, there is only one organization able to provide treatments to teens who are experiencing substance abuse. Expert after expert has explained to uVoice students how desperate they are for a permanent solution to an ever-growing problem.