



*Youth Vaping and Substance Abuse Awareness for Youth in Central Iowa  
White Paper Presented by  
uVoice, a Community Youth Concepts supported program  
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## Introduction

uVoice, a youth philanthropy board facilitated by Community Youth Concepts, consists of a group of thirteen students who live in the Des Moines metro area. Bimonthly, these students come together to identify issues facing youth in their community and to combat 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 dollars to non-profit organizations addressing the health-oriented issues prioritized by uVoice.

In previous years, uVoice has focused on topics relating to mental health, stress, suicide prevention, and human trafficking. This year, uVoice members chose to focus on a prominent issue among teenagers: vaping and addiction.

## Background

uVoice students agreed that although the subject of substance abuse is common among high schoolers, many are not educated about the negative side-effects that stem from the usage of e-cigarettes and nicotine products. Every student on our board could identify peers who have faced substance abuse problems, and the board ultimately realized that many students were misinformed about the dangers of vaping, specifically, of the harmful long-term health issues linked to vaping. The board believed that the community and schools lacked resources to help students already addicted to substance abuse. As a way for our board to become more educated on this topic, we decided to host a community cafe, a round table style event to gather information. As a result, the uVoice board better understood the causes and consequences of vaping in Polk county and was able to narrow down the underlying factors contributing to usage of e-cigarettes among teenagers.

## Community Needs Findings

This year's community needs assessment took place in the form of a community cafe that brought together 22 students (ages 13-24) from six different school districts across Central Iowa to discuss the significance of vaping and substance abuse in their lives. Topics that were covered included politics and substance abuse, education in schools on vaping, accessibility to drugs, and addiction. Some of the most impactful ideas that were discussed by this group of teens included:

- It is very easy for high school students, especially students with older siblings, in Iowa to get access to drugs and vapor products through friends and store clerks that rarely check IDs. This can be very detrimental to their learning experience in school.

- There is a lack of school education on substance use and vaping. What is provided (such as wall posters and guidance pamphlets) does not seem to have an effect on the student body. Additionally, school administrators are lenient on consequences for drug use and vaping and rarely enforce any type of constructive deterrent.
- The government and the general community do not provide accessible resources for teens struggling with addiction like free therapy or support groups. If they are present, they are not well advertised, and they are generally stigmatized as well.
- Students have been exposed to substance abuse and vaping as young as 6th grade, and one of the primary ways they are exposed to substance use is through social media (especially Instagram and Snapchat). Companies advertise these products to specifically appeal to younger users.
- The majority of students in attendance did not think raising the age to purchase tobacco products to 21 through a federal law would impact rates of youth vaping.
- According to many students interviewed during the community needs assessment, one of the leading factors for teens beginning to vape and use substances is peer pressure and the stress of students to conform to “high school norms.”
- Many students noted that there were several vape shops in the general vicinity of their school and how the shops were within walking distance of the nearby apartments that surrounded the area.

## Discussion

One of the most surprising take-aways from the Community Needs Assessment is how early students are exposed to vaping. When asked, “at what age do you think most students are exposed to vaping,” the most common answer was 6th grade, and in some cases even younger. uVoice was concerned that younger students are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure, and education about substance abuse is not given at that age. As a result, students could be using these products with no knowledge of the dangers and health consequences or resources to help them with addiction. To compound the problem, these products are designed to resemble every-day school supplies like flash drives, highlighters, and pens so parents and teachers don’t find out that students are vaping. At the time of the Community Needs Assessment there were over 7,000 flavors of vaping products; ranging from candy, fruity, cereal, etc.; most of which were targeted to kids and teenagers with the purpose of enticing first time tobacco users. In response to the question, “Why do you think people vape?” Two students said, “The ads make them look really cool,” and, “Yeah! They also advertise them as being better than cigarettes.” These products are marketed to youth on social media. Students indicated in the roundtable discussion that they have seen social media videos of vapor tricks, such as blowing vapor into rings, and using special vape pens with different LED lights. When students see celebrities and their friends doing these vapor trick challenges, they feel compelled to practice and create their own social media content to impress their friends and followers. In addition to these challenges, companies are creating advertisements to appeal to youth on social media. Reminiscent of cigarette advertisements of previous generations, these social media advertisements are designed to glamorize vaping and substance use.

A common theme from the Community Cafe was how easily accessible vape products are for students to acquire. At the time of our event the age restriction to purchase tobacco products had just been raised to 21. However, many students said that the age restrictions would not make a difference because students were already getting their products from older siblings and friends. Anecdotally, students shared stories of underage peers able to purchase products at stores and gas stations without needing to show identification. Because these products are not only sold at tobacco shops, but also gas stations,

convenience stores, and grocery stores; these products are available for purchase within walking distance of many homes and schools in the Des Moines metro.

A final theme that uVoice students heard throughout their needs assessment was the lack of education that students are receiving about vaping in their schools. Schools have long held the responsibility of educating students on a wide variety of health-related issues, primarily because they interact with the majority of young people in our community. Despite this, many students reported that they did not receive substance use education in school, or if they did, it was not very effective. For example, students said they remembered their D.A.R.E program in the fifth grade, but no follow up or further education after that point. The information that was given in many of these substance abuse classes wasn't applicable to younger students. Along with this, because of the lack of research and knowledge, vaping hasn't made its way into curriculum yet, despite it being a huge problem facing youth. Because of the lack of comprehensive education, some students will inevitably begin using drugs. Some students indicated that their schools had put up flyers related to vaping, but were skeptical that their peers noticed or paid attention to these messages. Students noted that the flyers frequently conveyed cliché messages such as “it is okay to ask for help” and “don't do drugs” but never addressed resources and educational tools to help combat teenage addiction. One student explained, “They really just drilled into our brain that it's [drug use] not good, but they didn't exactly tell us if you're addicted, how to help it, and then how to prevent it besides to just say no”. When we asked youth about addiction resources they knew about, no one could list any. Schools often don't emphasize rehabilitation resources or offer support to students addicted to drugs, instead resorting to half-hearted punishments or ignoring the issue completely. This leads to students becoming more and more addicted as no resources are offered and they are instead punished or stigmatized. Overall, the lack of applicable education and resources combined with incessant advertising of vapor products and other drugs leads to an environment where students are likely to use drugs or get addicted.

## Projects Funded

The board published a Request for Proposals to fund a nonprofit that works to prevent substance use and vaping in students through education about the harms of substance use, how to spot warning signs of addiction in peers, and/or provide resources to help teens who are currently addicted to substance or vaping. Example programs that fulfill these requirements may educate, late elementary and middle school students, about the harms of substance abuse and vaping while providing resources to students who may already be addicted to them. This kind of education can reach up into high school, but the most effective work for late teens would be to help those already addicted to substances or vapes, to educate peers about the warning signs of addiction, and to provide trusted adults for students to confide in about their or their friend's addictions.

This year, after much deliberation, the board decided to give their entire \$5,000 grant to Orchard Place, a counseling center in Des Moines. Their project, the Substance Use Program through their community based division PACE, is centered around helping youth who are already addicted to substances or vaping by offering support, therapy, and resources to quit their substance addictions. They offer group and individual therapy, as well as a variety of educational resources for students and families, including classes over drugs and alcohol. Orchard Place also distributes brochures and flyers concerning substance abuse and PACE throughout schools in the Des Moines metro, adding another preventative aspect to their project. The part of their project that really appealed to the group was their social media

campaign. In their application, Orchard Place wrote that they "...would create and promote a social media campaign targeted to youth to combat the predominantly positive messages that students are seeing about vaping and other substance abuse." uVoice is a student-led board, so when we heard about the social media aspect, we immediately knew how much of an impact that could make. Because of Orchard Place's educational and supportive measures to both prevent addiction and help those addicted as well as their families, the board decided to give them the full \$5,000.

## Recommendations

The Orchard Place PACE Program and anti-vaping social media campaign will be valuable additions to Polk County's substance use and vaping resources by supporting those affected by addiction and educating the general public on the lesser known topics surrounding vaping. Our community needs assessment showcased the lack of resources and the need for education about this topic. Our goal was to broaden the public's awareness of addiction and substance abuse in the county. The grants given to this organization will allow for increased understanding of the effects of substance use, who is most targeted, and how it affects youth in the Polk county area.

However, the work is not done. Those who vape right now are the test subjects for the long-term effects of vaping. There is much research still necessary to understand the complex nature of addiction, but funding is often hard to secure. Privately funded tobacco corporations are able to allocate significantly more funding to advertisements and targeted marketing than any division of the public health field can direct towards research or anti-substance campaigns at this time. These big companies have budgets specifically for tobacco marketing, while public health budgets have to account for hundreds of issues. According to the CDC, in 2018 "cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies spent \$9.06 billion on advertising and promotional expenses in the United States alone." This amount, spent in one year, is almost 56 times larger than the budget for the Truth Initiative's "FinishIt" anti-tobacco use campaign, which amounted in \$162 million in expenses over a two-year period. The public health field simply can't compete with that much funding.

Large portions of the private tobacco funding also goes specifically towards targeting children and teenagers. Youth are impressionable and are absorbing this targeted information at a much higher rate than adults are. According to the American Lung Association, 45% of youth remember an advertisement for vaping products two weeks after seeing it as compared to 25% of adults. Clearly the targeted demographic of these advertisements does not align with the demographic that is best equipped or even legally able to responsibly use substances or handle the possibility of addiction. Flashy designs, social media advertisements, and the promise of fun flavors draws youth to these products unproportionally from adults.

From the Community Needs Assessment, we also heard a lot of students discussing the variety of flavors that were available to the public. Vape brands use a variety of flavors to target teens and young adults to buy their products. One student even stated "I think that the flavors are what get kids hooked. Like they also advertise that juuls are fine for your health and stuff and obviously they aren't. I think that is what made teenagers think it was okay". Some of the flavors that entice many teenagers to start vaping are fruity ones like cherry and green apple which entice teenagers to try them. By banning these flavors, we can stop incentivizing teens to use vapes because they won't be geared towards that specific population. Many students agreed that banning flavors would be more effective than the recently passed

legislation that raised the age of buying tobacco products to 21 (as there are still other means to get vape pens and cigarettes).

During the Community Needs Assessment, we noticed that students were concerned with the lack of education they received related to vaping and addiction. Students also stated that although their teacher covered a small facet of substance abuse (regarding specific drugs), they rarely ever acknowledged vaping, an activity that has become widely popular amongst teens. In the Community Needs Assessment, participants also said that they had gone through a few classes regarding addiction in elementary school but it was rarely ever discussed again in the second half of the education. The students repeatedly stated that "teachers don't care" about the usage of e-cigarette products in the classroom. The uVoice board agreed that this likely stems from the lack of drug and substance education given to students, which translated to a lack of awareness in teens who are struggling with addiction.

The students agreed that an effective way to have a wide impact would be to have testimonials where students and other people who have had past experiences with addiction can share their thoughts. Substance use education also needs to expand past the students; adults and teachers can expand their knowledge on this topic so that they can have productive conversations with the students they know. Given that many schools have little to no protocol for addressing students who are dealing with addiction, a recommendation of ours is to have a set of guidelines to actively help and support students who are addicted to a substance instead of punishing or stigmatizing them; for example, the school could provide support group groups or resources for the students in question.

Prevention efforts and creative collaborations will help lower the rates of youth vaping and substance abuse, and support services for students will help uplift vulnerable people in our community. With everyone doing their part, our communities will be stronger, safer, and healthier.