

Project ALERT and Juvenile Justice System Unite to Fight Youth Meth Addiction

by Andrea Warren

Travelers along I-64 in southeastern Illinois see big sky, rolling hills, and picturesque farms. In the small towns that dot the landscape, people make a point of saying, “Hi, how are ya!”

But this corner of rural America has big city problems. Many of those small towns are frayed around the edges—evidence of the unemployment and poverty that has stalked this area in recent years because of downturns in an economy based on coal mining and agriculture.

According to George Timberlake, a community activist and a recently retired judge of the state’s Second Circuit, “Communities that were solidly middle class are now impoverished. Seventy percent of the children in Mt. Vernon, our largest community, come from homes that meet federal poverty guidelines. That’s an enormous number.”

Noting that drug abuse is often a by-product of poverty and the hopelessness that can accompany it, Timberlake said that over a decade ago, when he was on the bench first in traffic court and then in juvenile court, he noted increasing numbers of teens with alcohol and drug-related problems. In the last few years the drug of choice in southern Illinois has become methamphetamine, putting young people at greater risk than ever before. Nor is it the only threat.

“It’s hard for people to believe because we’re sparsely populated, but we’ve also had problems with crack cocaine and gangs,” Timberlake said. “Next we’re probably going to see an increase in heroin. It’s already becoming a huge problem in counties north of us. In other parts of the country where meth has been a problem, heroin often follows. It’s hard to imagine, but people out here in rural America are shooting up in cornfields.

“Clearly, we needed a way to address addiction in all its forms--a global approach, not one specific approach to one specific drug. Any drug use is part of a pattern of addiction that can be prevented if you get to kids early enough and give them the tools to stay off addictive substances. If we’re going to save our young people, we have got to give them these tools.”

The Path to Project ALERT

Timberlake’s quest for a solution led him to the conclusion that traditional approaches—rehab and prison time--did not work, that prevention was the answer. And not just any prevention program, but those like Project ALERT that are evidence-based. “We had several schools in Jefferson County already using Project ALERT and they had statistics to show that this program was effective,” he said. “As I learned more about Project ALERT, it became clear that it should be part of our approach.”

The judge turned to others in the 12-county Second Circuit who shared his concerns--specifically to the Juvenile Justice Council, which he had previously organized, bringing together area law enforcement, churches, social services, and schools to combine services to help keep young people in trouble out of court and out of prison. "We also wanted to figure out how to prevent the problems in kids' lives that get them into serious trouble in the first place," he said. "We work together closely and make lots of referrals to each other."

The Council collaborated with Cra-Wa-La, a social services agency that is part of the Juvenile Justice Council, to apply for a grant through the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). They received one of only ten grants SAMHSA awarded to communities using evidence-based programs to address growing meth abuse.

The grant, funded for three years at \$326,000 per year, resulted in the creation of the Methamphetamine Prevention Program of the Second Judicial Circuit of Illinois and is administered by Cra-Wa-La.

Marie Goff, Cra-Wa-La's executive director, noted that educating the public about meth is an important part of this program. "We began looking at this problem in 2003 and realized from our drug assessments and from the sharp upswing in case loads that we had youth either doing meth or living in homes where meth was being manufactured. You can make it your bathroom or even in a car and we have illegal meth labs all over the area," she said. "Children can get addicted just from the smoke.

"Parents need to know the signs that their children might be using meth and that it is a killer that ultimately shuts down the body. We had one mother who noticed her daughter's dramatic weight loss but thought she must be on some kind of special diet. Ten percent of people who use alcohol become alcoholics, but 90 percent of meth users become addicted. It happens incredibly quickly.

"Once addicted, they need money to support their habit and that's usually why they start manufacturing and selling meth. Since this is a rural area, getting the anhydrous ammonia they need is not a problem. Still, we're encouraged by new laws that are making it harder to get other ingredients needed to manufacture meth."

Delivering Project ALERT to Schools

Goff is pleased that Project ALERT will help educate young people about the dangers of meth. Tammy Boose, director of the Meth project, is overseeing the implementation of Project ALERT, from recruiting schools to training the teachers. It is in several pilot schools during the 2007-2008 school year.

"Even though we're providing the funding, we're giving schools as much autonomy as possible so they will take ownership of the program," she said. "We're not telling them which class or grade to use it in, though it's typically implemented in either sixth and seventh grade, or seventh and eighth grade.

We're offering to help get handouts ready and to do pre- and post-evaluations on the students. We'll also show them how to pull out the data specific to their students.

"We had a variety of teachers at our first training. What was exciting was that they wanted to be there. Everybody knows we have a problem with drugs far more dangerous than what we've faced in the past."

Schools that cannot spare teachers to present Project ALERT to their students are looking at other alternatives. Robyn Block, prevention specialist for Wayne County and state coordinator for SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions), plans for high school SADD members to go into middle schools to teach Project ALERT, using the program's evidence-based Teen Leader component.

"Our county will pilot this and consider promoting it as a statewide SADD project," she said. "We already know that middle school students respond favorably to high school students presenting prevention education to them. Project ALERT has an impressive curriculum and students like and respond to the videos. Using high school students to teach it takes some of the pressure off teachers who already have too much to do."

Boose says her organization's goal is to have Project ALERT in 12 schools at the end of three years. "But," she said, "we have 42 middle schools and our vision is to get the program into all of them and have the schools responsible for them. We want to help all our youth grow up to be drug free."

Timberlake has one additional goal. While Project ALERT will be offered in the youth corrections center in Harrisburg, IL, and by probation officers within the Second Circuit in weekly group settings, he also wants to see it offered in the juvenile prison system, where the worst offenders are.

"As many as 80 percent of these juvenile offenders are addicted or involved with drugs. Project ALERT may not really be strong enough for these repeat offenders—they probably need a program developed just for them—but it may help them think through the role of peer pressure in using drugs and I'm certain it will help the kids who are not involved with drugs stay away from them.

"Project ALERT is *that* good."

One Girl's Story

Meth leaves many victims in its wake, but the programs in place in Illinois' Second Circuit have given one of them a happy ending. Marie Goff remembers well the 14-year-old who came into the courts, hooked on meth and working as a prostitute to support her drug habit. She was arrested with adults running a mobile meth lab, and in many states would have gone to prison.

But because of the Second Circuit's community-based correction programs, which seek to divert youth from prison, she was assigned a court advocate and was sent through a detox program.

She also participated in Cra-Wa-La's Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) program--an evidence-based, blueprint treatment program is used to attempt to interrupt the family cycle of meth use and prevent addiction of younger family members. She was then placed in a foster home.

According to Goff, "She became a role model for her mother, who was also an addict and has since cleaned up. Today she is 18, has her GED and a job here in our community. She now realizes the harm she did to others by manufacturing meth, and although she was victimized by adults, she has accepted that she is accountable for her own life.

"Instead of shipping these juvenile offenders off to adult prisons and locking them up, we're keeping them in their home communities and working with them to get them back on track," Goff said.

"We view their care and rehabilitation as our responsibility. This girl's story also illustrates the compassion shown by the Second Circuit and the determination of the people here to turn around children's lives. "

Making a Difference

Since its founding in 1971, Cra-Wa-La has provided mentors for youth entering the juvenile justice system, says Marie Goff, executive director of Cra-Wa-La Volunteers in Probation. The name comes from the original three counties in the program--Crawford, Wabash and Lawrence. Today there are 15 counties represented. In addition to its mentoring program for teens and its meth prevention program with Project ALERT as one of its components, it has programs for children of incarcerated parents and offers a wide range of youth advocacy services.

Goff began volunteering with the program in 1990's after working in the corporate world for 25 years. When the program received a grant from the state of Illinois in 1997, Goff agreed to come aboard as the executive director. She now has nine people on staff and a team of 180 volunteers. The organization also relies on public and private donations.

Tammy Boose, Cra-Wa-La's project director, completed an internship with the organization as an Americorps VISTA volunteer after finishing her undergraduate degree at Eastern Illinois University. She has since received her master's degree in criminal justice from the University of Cincinnati and is also a busy wife and mother. A native of the area, and with three teenagers in the public schools, she is familiar with the impact drugs have had locally. "It's gotten to the point where some high school students think it's okay to use drugs as long as they aren't 'hard' drugs. We definitely have our challenges," she said.

"This is a rewarding place to work. When you're involved with programs that help children at risk, you're making a difference."

Judge George Timberlake

“Retired” is a relative term for George Timberlake. He left the bench in 2006 after 22 years with the Illinois Second Circuit and is now a full-time community volunteer and a consultant for the MacArthur Foundation. Illinois is one of four states selected by the Foundation for the development of a model system in juvenile justice—a goal Timberlake is passionate about. The state had the nation’s first juvenile court system and juvenile prison system. “Illinois is a hotbed of reform around juveniles and the court system,” Timberlake said, calling himself a “juvenile justice reform advocate.”

Though he rarely has a moment to call his own, he takes this in stride. “I retired to be busy,” he says, “and I’m blessed to be able to be so.”

Timberlake’s advice to other communities that might want to emulate the Illinois program is, “You must come together, collaborate, and honestly review your problems and possibilities. And you must select a program that is evidence based so you can maximize your success.”