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Chandler, Gilbert adopt grassroots approach to fight prescription drug abuse

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Srianthi Perera/Tribune Staff

Chandler-Gilbert Substance Abuse Task Force

Stephanie Siete, director of community education at Community Bridges in Mesa and a member of the Chandler-Gilbert Substance Abuse Task Force, speaks at the unveiling of Arizona's first sharps/syringe disposal kiosk at the Gilbert Police Department's lobby. Police departments of Chandler and Gilbert provide drug disposal bins that are accessible 24 hours a day. To find a nearby location, visit acpa.net and click on "Got Drugs."

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By Srianthi Perera, Tribune Staff Writer

Chandler and Gilbert have a new force to counter prescription drug misuse.

Facing common issues, representatives from the two cities have formed the Chandler-Gilbert Substance Abuse Task Force to address the opioid medication and other drug dependency issues prevalent in the area.

In a 2014 survey of 12th graders in Maricopa County by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, 15 percent of high school seniors admitted using prescription pain medications. In the same year, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 1,211 overdoses statewide, while across the country, more than 1,700 young adults died from prescription overdose, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Steven R. Brown has run the Renaissance Recovery Center in Gilbert for 15 years and receives about 10-15 telephone calls each week from people struggling with addiction to prescription drugs, while half to two-thirds of those he treats suffer from the same issue.

"Over the years, I have seen a dramatic increase in the number of people struggling with painkiller addiction," he said. "It's fairly a common pattern for people to start using prescription opioids and become highly dependent. They then graduate to other substances."

In both Chandler and Gilbert, grassroots initiatives to fight drug abuse are nothing new.

Chandler Coalition on Youth Substance Abuse, called CCYSA, has been focusing on prescription drug use for more than six years. Following on the heels of a successful initiative of the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, the nonprofit began its own RX360 Initiative in October last year.

Gilbert Mayor John Lewis spearheaded a Behavioral Health and Substance Abuse Task Force a few months ago, with a focus on education.

Ted Huntington, CCYSA's community programs coordinator, said that it's time to "break down the silos."

"We're a group of people coming in and focusing on a vision," he said. "Each individual is playing their part in the community to bring change in the most effective way."



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The new initiative has a five sector approach: healthcare providers, pharmacists/dispensers, law enforcement, education/prevention and rehabilitation collaborate to provide a unified solution.

One of the biggest bugbears is the quantity and frequency of often-addictive painkillers that are prescribed by the medical profession.

Dr. Sandy Indermuhle, ER director at Dignity Health, which runs Chandler Regional Medical Center and Mercy Gilbert Medical Center, has worked to reduce the amounts of medication being prescribed at the hospitals.

Rather than issuing consecutive prescriptions for pain medication, she has directed physicians to refer the patients to a pain management specialist.

"We really want one person in control of their pain medication than different physicians," she said. "I'm just trying to encourage my physicians to use that as well when they see someone with a chronic pain complaint."

Instructions on how to safely store and dispose of medications are provided to patients leaving the hospital, in particular if they have children in the home. Police departments of both cities provide drug disposal bins that are accessible 24 hours a day.

Also, Indermuhle has reminded physicians to use the Arizona Board of Pharmacy's Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which enables doctors and pharmacists to check a patient's prescription history and intervene with those who are abusing medications.

Indermuhle concedes that people will still find illegal ways to obtain their drugs. "But if we can cut down on the amount that we are writing and making available, I think that would help a lot," she said.

Liz Beck helps in the back end of the prescription drug epidemic. Redeemed 2 Repeat, the nonprofit she set up in Gilbert, works to provide transition to addicts who have completed a treatment program and are moving on with their lives.

"With the way that life functions, it's very overwhelming," she said. "If people don't have other people in their life that's helping them, their instinct is to just go back into a life of addiction because that's what they know."

Redeemed 2 Repeat operates without a residential facility, but organizes a weekly support group meeting at Sovereign Grace Church in Gilbert. At a given time, the group works with about 35 patients.

"What we bring to the task force is a connection to the local church," Beck said. "All we're trying to figure out is how we can get the church more involved with the issue of addiction."

High school students are also a focus of the effort. In the fall, CCYSA is organizing a competition titled "Silent Killer" for students to create a public service announcement on preventing substance abuse.

"The great benefit of that is getting the teens more involved, and chances are, to think about it and to share with their families and use it as a talking point," said Melissa Kowalski, chief programs officer.

Although the two cities' partnership is in its early stages and, as it evolves, the results may differ from expectations, participants nurture hopes of positive results.

"Partnerships are always a bridge," Mayor Lewis said. "At this point, it's more we see an open door to information, to resources and to expertise that will help our Gilbert community, and we are grateful for it."

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