

Our goal is to provide education to representatives from Region 6 regarding matters related to substance abuse, prevention, and treatment. Our coalition includes PMP (Prevention Means Progress), TFS (Tobacco Free Sarpy), TFCC (Tobacco Free Cass County), LiveWise, NFC (Nebraska Families Collaborative), CSI (Child Saving Institute), Boys Town, is overseen by Region 6 Behavioral Healthcare, and is always adding to our membership.

Prescriptions: What LEARN wants you to know this quarter

Prescription Drug Abuse Affects Nebraska Families

In Omaha, NE in April of 2012, four prescription drugs put an end to a ten year-old's life. Shykell Robinson's mother was forced to call 911 when she could not wake her son on a Sunday morning. The ten year old boy was rushed to the hospital and experienced cardiac arrest before passing away. The toxicology report finally came in to show that Shykell had died of a drug overdose. Methadone, Oxycodone, Lorazepam, and Haloperidol were all found in this young boy's body.

Melanie Uher-Flom, a former track star from Wilber-Clatonia High School, died just two weeks after giving birth to her daughter, Jace in 2011. A college graduate and new mother, she lost her life to accidental overdose when she ingested a prescription drug with alcohol while hanging out with friends. Her story made People magazine where a picture of her toddler daughter is reaching out to her gravestone. Her prescription drug use began in 2005 when she was in a car crash that nearly took her life. She was first introduced to prescription drugs from the doctor. When she was pregnant in 2010, her old injuries became quite painful for her and she asked her doctor for Percocet. Her father stated that he knew she had an addictive personality but that she seemed to be on track at this point in her life. Melanie wanted to be a good mother and have a great life, but addiction got in her way. Jace lives in Minnesota with her father, who brings her down to see Melaine's parents on a regular basis. Not wanting her death to be in vain, her parents and family members have taken it upon themselves to speak out about prescription drugs and warn young people in their community of the dangers.

What Is the Relationship Between Marijuana Legalization and Rx Drug Use?

Last quarter, LEARN shared information on marijuana and the outcomes of marijuana policies. A new research study published in the Journal of American Medical Association's Internal Medicine in August 2014 showed that states that legalized medical marijuana use prior to 2010 have seen a nearly 25% decrease in opioid overdose deaths. (JAMA, 2014) Marijuana advocates and some mainstream media outlets have interpreted this to mean that medical marijuana is more effective and safer than traditional painkillers for those with chronic pain. Because of this

interpretation, many have taken the opportunity to express further support for the legalization of recreational and/or medical marijuana, despite the fact that the authors of the study explicitly state that a direct causal link between medical marijuana legalization and decreased opioid overdose deaths cannot be established yet. More research needs to be done in order to substantiate this particular benefit of medical marijuana legalization. Many other factors may be at play in these findings, including but not limited to the inconsistent way in which states report overdose deaths, or the timing of these states' implementation of a prescription drug monitoring program (used to curb opioid abuse). The bottom line is that these states are still a long way from knowing conclusively that medical marijuana can help prevent opioid overdose death, but that is not what one will hear from the loudest voices.

Prescription Drug Abuse Trends in Nebraska

Prescription drug abuse is the fastest growing drug problem in the nation. Data regarding prescription drug abuse can be hard to calculate. Often times, the numbers only look at prescription drug OVERDOSES or DEATH by overdose. To get a holistic view at Rx drug abuse trends in Nebraska, one would need to collect the aforementioned data, the number of people that had taken someone else's prescription, the number of people who took more than the prescribed amount of their prescription, those who illegally bought a prescription on the street, etc. Therefore, it is premature, if not altogether inaccurate, for sources like Trust For America's Health to rate Nebraska at the bottom of nationwide Rx overdoses. (TFAH, 2013)

In 2010, 11% of 12th graders had abused prescription drugs in their lifetime and 4% had done so in the past 30 days. (Nebraska Risk and Protective Factor

Student Survey, 2010). The hardships of prescription drug abuse not only impacts individuals but communities, employers, the healthcare system, and public and private insurers: In addition to the human costs, the epidemic of prescription drug overdose imposes a major financial toll. Nonmedical use of opioid pain relievers—use without a prescription or simply for the feeling or experience the drug causes—costs US insurance companies up to \$72.5 billion annually in healthcare expenditures. The epidemic also imposes substantial costs on state Medicaid programs. A 2009 Government Accountability Office report found that in 2006–2007, roughly 65,000 Medicaid beneficiaries in five states incurred over \$60 million in drug costs related to "doctor shopping" for controlled substance prescriptions (i.e., patients obtaining controlled substances from multiple healthcare practitioners without prescribers' knowledge of other prescriptions).

In 2012, 93 Nebraskans were killed in alcohol related automobile crashes. That same year, just in the Douglas County/Sarpy County/Cass County area morgues, **90 people died of prescription drug overdoses.** Keep in mind that this does not include all of the other counties in Nebraska, nor does it include the numbers of people that die in a hospital after overdosing. If it did, one would expect for that number to greatly increase.

What Are Possible Solutions?

LEARN members have collectively spent hundreds of hours researching how to help solve the problem of prescription drug abuse. The most promising clinical tools to address prescription drug abuse are state Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs). **Stay tuned to next quarter's issue to learn why a PDMP will save Nebraskans' lives and taxpayers' money.**



LEARN's promise: LEARN and its members will continue to work in our schools and communities to prevent prescription drug abuse. As policy makers, you have a large task – to improve and protect the health of all Nebraskans. We ask that you would consider the health, safety, and well-being of all Nebraskans—including those at risk for prescription drug abuse—as you propose and implement policy that can save and improve lives.