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**The Big Three – Youth Suicide, Underage Drinking and Prescription Drug Abuse Considered Major Issues in Oklahoma: National Prevention Week 2013**

During National Prevention Week, May 13-17, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is asking parents, communities, churches, schools and other youth-related organizations to take an active interest in the welfare of our state’s young people – especially when it involves activities that could be risky, harmful or even deadly.

“Youth suicide, underage drinking and prescription drug abuse are major concerns for our youth,” said Jessica Hawkins, director of prevention programs at ODMHSAS. “It is important that all of us, as Oklahomans, come together and address these issues for the betterment of all Oklahomans.”

“Parents, community leaders, faith leaders and others invested in the well-being of our youth all have the ability to make a difference, and can achieve even more when working together at the community level to implement coordinated prevention efforts” she said. “The statistics on youth suicide, underage drinking and prescription drug abuse are too high, and it is up to all concerned adults and leaders of the community to become involved and prevent these tragedies.”

**Suicide**

From 2003-2009, suicide was the second leading cause of death for Oklahoma youth age 10-24. “Current depressed mood” and relationship problems were the two most common factors related to these deaths.

Overall, deaths due to suicide across all age groups in Oklahoma are increasing, jumping from 567 in 2009 to 618 in 2010. Oklahoma ranks 13th nationally in terms of suicide rate.

An estimated 90% of people who die by suicide – regardless of age – have a diagnosable mental illness or substance abuse disorder.

According to the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS) of Oklahoma public high school students in grades 9-12:

* 6.3% had attempted suicide one or more times
* 10.7% made a plan to attempt suicide
* 14.3% seriously considered attempting suicide
* 28.6% experienced sadness for at least 2 weeks

Hawkins said parents, clergy, coaches and others involved in a youth’s life can help prevent suicide.

“Suicide is a preventable tragedy,” she said. “Whether a person is struggling with depression, addiction or relationship issues, suicide should never be an option. There are ways to help people out of a situation in which they may believe there is no way out. Talk to someone. There is help.”

She also encouraged communities across the state to consider building a program for suicide prevention, whether the emphasis is on reducing stigma, bringing awareness or highlighting referral sources, “because one life lost to suicide is one too many.”

In Oklahoma, anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – a free, anonymous, 24-hour hotline. The number is 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Oklahomans can also call 211 for help.

**Underage Drinking**

Youth are bombarded daily with alcohol advertising that promises popularity, success, excitement and fun just by drinking the “right” beer or alcoholic drink. But the consequences are rarely depicted.

“Thousands of young people die each year from alcohol-related car wrecks, suicides, homicides, burns and drowning. Alcohol use is also associated with juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, fetal alcohol syndrome, sexually transmitted diseases, reduced academic achievement and increased high-school dropout rates.”

Parents, community and faith leaders, and other concerned adults must do a better job of communicating expectations to young people about no alcohol use before age 21 and enforcing laws and home policies about underage drinking.

In Oklahoma, the average age of first use of alcohol in Oklahoma is about 13 years old. Nearly 40 percent of all Oklahoma high school students say they are regular drinkers and 22 percent are binge drinkers. Seventeen percent say they have driven when drinking, and 27 percent have ridden with someone who is drinking.

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that youth who use addictive substances before age 18 are six times more likely to develop a substance abuse problem as an adult than those who waited until the legal age of 21.

For the teenage brain, which is still developing, alcohol can be especially damaging.

“The ‘higher-order’ brain centers, which are responsible for reasoning and problem solving, don't fully develop until young adulthood (between the ages of 21-25),” Hawkins said. “So, it’s a cruel irony that, just when the brain is most vulnerable to the effects of substance abuse, that’s also the time when people are most likely to experiment with alcohol or drugs.”

A National Institutes of Mental Health neuroscientist, who specializes in studying the adolescent brain, said he tells teenagers “if they’re doing drugs or alcohol that evening, it may not just be affecting their brains for that night or even for that weekend, but for the next 80 years of their life."

“We have made progress in Oklahoma, especially in the area of the statewide social host law, also known as “Cody’s Law,” which imposes fines or jail time for adults or minors who provide a location for kids under age 21 to drink alcohol.

Alcohol education programs within Oklahoma schools and efforts to involve primary care physicians in screening for alcohol abuse are also under way. In fact, all Oklahoma high schools have AlcoholEdu available to them at no cost through a partnership between the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

**Prescription Drug Abuse**

Both nationally and in Oklahoma, prescription drug abuse is on the rise. Perhaps even more frightening, though, is the number of fatal overdoses that have accompanied this trend.

In 2010, Oklahoma had the 4th-highest unintentional poisoning death rate in the nation, the vast majority of which involved prescription drug abuse. That same year, Oklahoma also had the 9th-highest rate of deaths involving prescription painkillers in the nation, with thenumber of fatal drug overdoses more than doubling over the past 10 years, to 739 in 2010.

State autopsy statistics show that the most prolific killers are the prescription painkillers hydrocodone and oxycodone, often in combination with the anti-anxiety drug alprazolam.

Many people may think prescription drug abuse impacts primarily adult populations, but the fact is that more and more young people are abusing these substances, said Hawkins. Nearly 22 percent of Oklahoma 12th graders say they have used prescription drugs without a doctor telling them to do so once or more in their lifetimes and nearly 10 percent had done so in the past 30 days (2010 Oklahoma Prevention Needs Assessment).

Young people may perceive prescription drugs as being “less harmful” than other drugs, but they can be every bit as harmful, and deadly, when not taken as prescribed and used by someone other than for whom they were prescribed.

To obtain prescription drugs, youth most often get them from home medicine cabinets, or from other family members and friends. And, for the second year in a row, more teens said prescription drugs were easier to buy than beer.

Hawkins said parents are the most powerful resource for noticing signs of potential suicide, and preventing underage alcohol and drug use within their families. Other adults or authority figures are also important.

“You may not think they’re listening to you, or following your example, but they are,” she said. Clear communication about the negative effects of alcohol or prescription drugs, as well as about parental expectations, can significantly decrease substance abuse in teens.”

For more information or referral services, call the department’s “REACHOUT” hotline at 1-800-522-9054. The agency’s website at [www.odmhsas.org](http://www.odmhsas.org) also contains resources related to underage substance abuse prevention.

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