

The Promote Prevent Commission

Thursday, November 2, 2017
Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital - Plymouth
275 Sandwich Street, Plymouth MA 02360

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the Promote Prevent Commission. My name is Traci Wojciechowski and I serve as Regional Director of Student Assistance Programs at Caron Treatment Centers, one of the largest and oldest addiction treatment and behavioral healthcare facilities in the country.

Caron's mission is to transform lives impacted by substance use disorders (SUDs) through proven, evidence-based, comprehensive and personalized behavioral healthcare. With 60 years in the field, we have helped over one hundred thousand patients and their families develop the tools they need to lead fulfilling lives.

We believe that to truly end this opioid and addiction crisis, we need to focus on education, prevention and early intervention efforts. Caron has provided these services for over 27 years. Through our Student Assistance Program (SAP) we aim to guide students to healthy, productive living by partnering with schools, families, communities and other organizations. In New England communities alone, we have partnered with over 500 schools and impacted over 50,000 students, parents, caregivers and community members since 2001.

Caron recognizes a need to intervene as early as possible in a child's life. Behavioral health disorders are among the top conditions that cause disability and carry a high burden of disease in the U.S., resulting in significant costs to families, employers and publicly-funded health systems. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), by 2020 mental health and substance use disorders will surpass all physical diseases as a major cause of disability worldwide. It is imperative then, that we provide prevention services early and often to help build social and emotional learning in our young children so that this projection does not become a reality.

A collective, comprehensive response across multiple sectors is needed for prevention to truly work. Community mobilization, environmental strategies and school-based prevention education all play an integral role in the prevention of behavioral health disorders. School-based prevention programming must focus on specific problems within a community, reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors. Programs such as *Botvin's LifeSkills Training*, an evidenced-based curriculum, includes these components and should be made available in all schools. Studies testing its effectiveness have found that *LST* can reduce the prevalence of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug use by as much as **80 percent**. In addition, students who receive programs that promote this type of learning are more likely to attend school, receive better grades, have less conduct problems, and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.

Prevention programs should also start as early as preschool, utilizing curriculums such as *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)* curriculum). These programs should all be long-term with repeated interventions to have the greatest impact. For example, research shows that the benefits from middle school prevention programs diminish unless there are follow-up programs in high school. Unfortunately, many schools lack the necessary monetary resources to integrate prevention in all grades (K-12). It will be imperative that funding be made available to implement this comprehensive approach. Funding is also necessary to support on-going educator training to ensure that the programs are being implemented with fidelity.

To maximize the impact of school-based prevention, it is essential that family-based programs are made available throughout the Commonwealth. Evidenced-based programs such as *Strengthening Families* and *Guiding Good Choices* enhance family bonding and relationships. They include parenting skills, training in drug education as well as practice in developing, discussing, and enforcing family policies on substance use.

Supported scientific evidence shows that substance misuse and SUDs can be reliably identified through screening. We support the recent mandate of Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) in all Massachusetts' schools. Caron believes in this evidenced-based approach and is developing an online educational tool that incorporates our experience in the field to train those working with children and youth to use SBIRT most effectively. We also recommend that schools look to also integrate *Teen Intervene* into their school communities. *Teen Intervene* is a time-efficient, evidence-based, SBIRT model of care for teenagers suspected of having mild to moderate problems with alcohol or substance abuse. It has been proven to reduce the use of alcohol and marijuana when measured at six months and twelve months post intervention.

Finally, we recognize that health care professionals are positioned to prevent the tragic consequences of adolescent substance use, however many lack the necessary training to do so. Additional funding is necessary to provide comprehensive training for these professionals regarding SUDs and provide them with the tools to intervene when needed. Caron has integrated the training of health care professionals into our continuum of services which empowers them to recognize the signs and symptoms of SUDs and to prescribe responsibly. We have trained close to 500 health care professionals since the inception of our program six years ago.

Every community and nearly every family in the Commonwealth has been impacted by addiction and tragic overdose losses. A disease and public health issue this complex requires leadership and innovation, plus focused consistency for positive outcomes for Massachusetts' citizens. Ongoing funding for upstream prevention such as *SBIRT*, *PATHS*, *LifeSkills Training*, *Teen Intervene*, as well as family-based prevention programming and training for health care professionals is essential. We must establish and maintain a systematic process for the prevention of behavioral health disorders, intervene when risk factors for substance use and other destructive behaviors are observed and make appropriate resources available to those that need them.

We look forward to all opportunities to support these important prevention initiatives in the Commonwealth. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

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