

Samost Jewish Family and Children's Service

The Drug Addiction Epidemic in Suburbia- Community Awareness Program

'Right in Our Backyard'

Last year, JFCS became acutely aware of a *'new normal'* that has been brewing in our suburbs. Narcotic addiction, related to prescription pain medicine and heroin, has begun to reach epic levels in our community. With heroin in our area at its purest levels in the country, addiction had led to a windfall of deaths. A report in 2013 developed by the Trust for America's Health shared two new sets of statistics, one national and the other local. Each starkly illustrates an **epidemic of prescription-drug overdoses**, which have quadrupled since 1999 and suggest that what is coming next is resurgence in heroin deaths. The report showed that between 1999-2010, deaths from prescription opiates like OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin overtook those from heroin and cocaine combined. The local numbers released in October 2013 by Philadelphia's Office of Addiction Services showed steady increases in prescription-drug deaths, but an even more dramatic jump in heroin-related deaths which more than doubled between 2010 and 2012. **The vast majority of heroin addicts begin with prescription pain pills, often times legitimately acquired.** Addiction may follow. Then, when the person can no longer afford or acquire the pain pills they turn to a cheap, increasingly potent and uncontrolled alternative-heroin. In addition, because the drug can be snorted rather than taken by needle, the stigma has decreased and use has increased.

In the fall of 2013, JFCS participated in a conference focused on educating our local teachers, parents, and physicians about this heart breaking issue. In relation, the agency developed a new Recovery Chavurah (friendship circle) for families and addicts in recovery, and we were the proud sponsors of Camden County's Community Summit about the opiate and heroin crisis, which was held on May 19, 2014.

Inspired by the Camden County's Addiction Awareness Task Force, in fiscal year 2014-2015 JFCS launched *'Right In Our Backyard,'* a program of awareness and prevention that focused on our Jewish community in Southern New Jersey through local synagogues and Jewish organizations. The program, consisting of a panel of experts, offers a multi-leveled experience for parents and teens. The two-hour panel presentation is presented by a group of five panelists, which includes: an addictions specialist, two parents who lost their children to opiate/heroin addiction, a young adult in recovery and a member of law enforcement. Each panelist gives a presentation, interlaced with dramatic video snippets (from www.kidsaredying.org) and power points. The addictions specialist gets the teens up and moving with an interactive 'true or false' segment to engage them and test their knowledge of the subject matter. In the last half hour, parents and teens are separated for more intimate, candid discussion. Parents are led by the member of law enforcement and the parents who lost children, while the students engage with the individual in recovery and the addictions specialist. Materials are distributed to parents and students, giving them resources, tools and tips for teens dealing with peer pressure.

'Right In Our Backyard' shines a light on the prevalence of the issues, normalizes discussions on the topic, shares warning signs and offers safe and accessible ways to seek guidance and help. Ultimately, the program is saving lives by increasing awareness, promoting conversation and normalizing the 'ask for help'. In its first year, JFCS educated over 450 students and parents, and 50 professionals, as to

signs of addiction, effects of addiction, ways to seek help, ways to get out of an uncomfortable situation, disposal methods of prescription narcotics, and how to begin the discussion if they or someone they know is suspected of taking drugs. Many of the teens and parents who have seen the program say it has forever changed the way they think about addiction.

On May 3, 2015, *'Right In Our Backyard'* was the proud recipient of AJFCA's Goodman Award, which recognizes programs that are creative, sustainable and responsive to a community problem. Being the honoree entitled JFCS to make a 90-minute 'train the trainers' presentation to our colleagues at the AJFCA conference in Miami, Florida. The presentation focused on the creation and development of the addictions awareness program, and provided JFCS with a valuable opportunity to draw attention to a grassroots attempt to combat a growing, national problem. The education succeeded in fostering considerable interest in *'Right In Our Backyard'* from organizations located outside of South Jersey.

As a result, this year, in addition to our local programming, JFCS is joining with other agencies to bring this critical information to their communities. On October 27th, in collaboration with Jewish Family Service of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, and the Kulanu School of Jewish Studies, JFCS will be presenting Right In Our Backyard at Congregation Beth Israel, in Northfield, New Jersey. On November 8th, in conjunction with Jewish Community Services of Baltimore and Congregation Oheb Shalom, we will be presenting in Baltimore, Maryland. Inspired by the JFCS program presentation in Florida, Jewish Family Service of Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren Counties created their own model of *'Right In Our Backyard'*, and will be presenting it to their community on October 28th.

Impressed by our efforts to take their message further, the County of Camden has joined forces as a sponsor. Through this relationship, we are expanding into the secular community, and will be making community presentations in municipalities designated by the county, the first of which will take place on December 1st, in the Township of Berlin, New Jersey.

The best way to stem this epidemic is to educate our youth and their parents, in the hopes of preventing further addiction and deaths from overdose. At some vulnerable point in the future, we believe that our attendees will think about this program and what they have learned and make a choice that will save their lives. If you are interested in developing this compelling program for your community, please contact Meredith Cohen, Director of Special Projects and Compliance, at (856) 424-1333.