

Prescription Drug Pilot Project

According to the Ventura County Medical Examiner, there were 165 deaths in Ventura County attributed to drug overdose in 2017. Of those, 56% (92) were attributed to an overdose of prescription opioids, more commonly known or referred to as painkillers. Examples of these commonly abused drugs include OxyContin (oxycodone), Vicodin (hydrocodone), codeine, and morphine. The abuse of these prescription painkillers brings incredible risk, especially during adolescence. In response to a marked national and local increase in prescription opioid abuse, Ventura County Office of Education and Ventura County Behavioral Health embarked on developing a pilot initiative with a high school-aged audience, and their parents, in mind. The aim of this initiative is to educate and create awareness of these risks, and potentially prevent experimentation or recreational, non-medical abuse of these drugs.

After analyzing local, longitudinal data sets on youth prescription drug abuse rates and conducting several focus groups with Ventura County high school students, it was concluded that an informational awareness campaign was a viable strategy to approach the subject with young people and their parents/guardians. The creative development portion of this project was then managed by a local firm, Idea Engineering, who created a short graphic-novel stylized story highlighting the often unforeseen outcomes of prescription opioid abuse – overdose and addiction. These two outcomes were identified by the youth focus groups as high priority, important points of which young people should be aware.

Idea Engineering developed two illustrated bilingual stories of a pair of teens (one male, one female) inadvertently falling into prescription drug abuse. The chosen print medium was small booklets and classroom posters. The purpose of these printed short stories was to have the reader understand how someone can become addicted to prescription painkillers and how overdose can happen unintentionally and with unfortunate ease.

The produced materials were then disseminated with a two-pronged approach: the posters would be displayed in specifically targeted courses and grades at a pilot school, and the teachers hosting these posters in the classroom would introduce them with accompanying talking points. The booklets were intended to go to parents and guardians and were part of a “resource table” placed at varsity home games during the football season. Hundreds of parents and guardians received the booklets and interfaced with VCOE Health and Prevention Programs staff during the games. Not only did these adults receive information, but many also took the opportunity to ask questions of the staff experts about alcohol and other

drug abuse, as well as how to provide positive opportunities for their children. Many school staff also stopped by the table to receive information and ask questions.

Additionally, a survey was administered to nearly 400 students to gauge their current attitudes and perceptions of harm around prescription opioid use. This initial survey revealed that while the vast majority of survey respondents (77%) had reported never using prescription drugs recreationally, 38% of the respondents also felt that a person using prescription drugs to get high once or twice a week posed “no risk” to only a “slight risk” of harming themselves. It was apparent that another phase of the campaign would need to address this low perception of harm.

Thus, a 20-minute in-class presentation was developed to expand upon information touched on by the visual campaign and the aforementioned teachers’ talking points, and was presented to over 400 tenth grade students at the pilot site. The presentation differentiated between the legitimate use of prescription opioids, and what is considered abuse of these drugs (using prescription drugs not prescribed to the user, or not using them as directed by the prescribing medical professional). The presentation then covered the risks involved in abusing these drugs, namely the high potential for addiction and the possibility of experiencing an unintentional overdose. The student audience was also provided the opportunity to ask questions of the expert presenters. In written evaluations following each presentation, many students stated that they learned the dangers of even casual use of these drugs and the ease of which a person can overdose.

The information disseminated by this campaign was data-informed and continued to evolve as the project progressed and other needs emerged. In continuing the project for the 18-19 school year, the next phase will include a targeted pre and post-survey of the program participants to gauge any changes in level of knowledge by students and staff as well as changes in perception of harm.