

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Youth Task Force Meets and Mulls Over Substances, Consequences and Chowder

By MEGAN DOOLEY

There's nothing like a piping hot cup of New England's finest potage to warm parents to the idea of talking to their kids about drugs and alcohol.

The Martha's Vineyard Youth Task Force welcomed its highest turnout yet of seventh and eighth grade parents to this season's final Chat and Chowder event at the West Tisbury School on Tuesday night. The dinner and discussion were held the previous week at four other Island schools.



The force chats about substance abuse prevention.

Parents were invited to bring an open mind and a hearty appetite to the discussion about the dangers of underage drinking among Island youth.

“There is a substance abuse problem in this community. People just don't see it as a problem, but it's a problem. Our rates of substance abuse here among youth and adults are higher than state and national averages,” said task force chairwoman Cindy Doyle.

“Talk early, talk often,” was a recurring theme at the meeting. Task force members encouraged parents to maintain open lines of communication with their children.

“Kids that drink before [age] 15 are four times more likely to become addicted,” said Mrs. Doyle.

“We need to push back the onset of the drinking age as far as we can,” added task force representative Bill Jones.

Based on surveys collected by the task force, parental disapproval is the number one

alcohol deterrent for middle school age children. The group encouraged parents to make the most of this influence, both by discussing the problem and by forbidding the use of drugs and alcohol in their homes.

Parents were invited to join in the Martha's Vineyard Safe Homes Pledge, a program in which parents pledge to maintain a home environment that does not tolerate underage drinking or drug use. Its secondary purpose is to create a network of parents who feel comfortable contacting one another to ensure that their children are being properly chaperoned.

“This is a way for parents to make a commitment to themselves and their families to help protect their children,” said task force coordinator Theresa Manning.

The task force was established in 2004 to help tackle a growing substance abuse problem among Island youth. It has since collected nearly a million dollars in grant money to fund ongoing efforts to meet the children's needs.

“Social-norms marketing is a positive way to approach issues,” said Mr. Jones of one method in particular. Colorful task force posters declaring that the majority of Martha's Vineyard high school students do not engage in underage drinking help to assuage fears in younger students about the social consequences for choosing to abstain.

“We debunk the myths and try to do it in a very positive, upbeat way,” he explained.

“We really want kids to look at [the posters], stop, and think,” added task force coordinator Jaime Spears.

Another task force initiative helped to raise awareness about the penalties for providing underage children with alcohol. In the “sticker shock” campaign, parents and students decorated shopping bags and alcohol products in various liquor stores around the Island with stickers listing possible consequences.

Student surveys conducted by the task force have charted significant progress in their mission to combat underage drinking. A survey taken two years ago showed that close to 75 per cent of high school seniors had had at least one drink of alcohol in the month prior. Preliminary results from this year's survey show that the number has dropped considerably.

“Some of the things that are happening [in the task force] are really taking hold,” said Mr. Jones.