

# Families important factor in addressing drug abuse, local leaders say



Wayne Isailovich discusses the need for more in-patient treatment of addiction lasting 90-180 days. (Jim Karczewski / Post-Tribune)

By **Becky Jacobs**

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**T**here's a belief that most teens are introduced to drugs at large, risqué parties, but that's just not true, Porter County Sheriff David Reynolds said.

"Do you know how people get introduced to drugs?" Reynolds asked members of the Governor's Task Force on Drug Enforcement, Treatment and Prevention at their meeting Monday at Indiana University Northwest in Gary. "Their parents."

Reynolds and other leaders from Lake and Porter counties urged the task force to consider how big of a role family dynamics play in the heroin problem in Northwest Indiana and the opioid epidemic across the state. While treatment is vital to combating this problem, the leaders said, it cannot be completely effective without prevention and education that addresses what led to the addiction.

"You cannot just treat the user, but you must treat the family as well," said Jena Bellezza, vice president of

community outreach at the Indiana Parenting Institute.

The institute works to educate parents on how to create healthy, strong relationships with their children by addressing substance abuse and how it affects each member of the family. Children witness how parents choose drugs to cope with problems, and they'll carry that with them, she said.

When Bellezza's life started to unravel while she was living in Indianapolis, as she was about to lose her job, car and home, she was running out of options, she said.

"I just did not know what to do," Bellezza said. "I just knew that after I tried everything I knew to do ... I had one left, and I tried it. It was drinking."

Bellezza's mother intervened, showing Bellezza that there was another path, she said. But children don't always have that person who will step in, Lake County Prosecutor Bernard Carter said.

Carter said he believes that the way to stop the cycle of multiple generations caught in the criminal justice system is to provide education and outreach to create healthier, more stable family relationships. This isn't always addressed, he said, because politicians don't want to offend people by stepping into families' personal lives. But there's a need for what the Indiana Parenting Institute aims to accomplish, he said.

People in urban or lower-income neighborhoods aren't the only ones affected, said Wayne Isailovich, director of Addiction and Behavioral Counseling Services in Merrillville. It affects everyone from all socioeconomic backgrounds, he said.

Treatment shouldn't be ignored, he said, and Indiana needs an overhaul to improve its inpatient treatment services to get people the long-term treatment they need, he said, especially when a person doesn't have health insurance or the means to pay for treatment.

As Reynolds puts it, "jails are like litmus tests for your county," and the Porter County jail reflects the heroin epidemic in its area. Ninety-five percent of the male inmate population of the jail is in there because of substance abuse, mainly heroin, Reynolds said.

Reynolds said he doesn't want inmates just sitting around, watching TV, wasting time, he said. He wants them to get the help they need to become an asset to the community, which is why he's started substance abuse programs in his jail. But it's important to educate people before they end up in the criminal justice system, he said.

Last summer, Reynolds had a 12-minute film created, in which inmates explain how they started using drugs. The majority of the inmates in the film said they started in their teenage years, he said.

That's why Reynolds shows the film in classrooms around the county, even to students as young as fifth grade, to instill in students from an early age the dangers of heroin, he said.

"We have to put more time and effort into educating the young adults in our state," Reynolds said. "If we don't, we're going to have these task forces every year. ... You have to have a direction, and it has to be toward the kids."

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