

J. Gary DeComo
Magisterial District Judge
Ford City PA

Heroin/Opioid Public Hearing
Kovalchick Center, Indiana PA
SEPTEMBER 20, 2016

We are here today because opioid addiction is taking a toll on our families, the criminal justice system, and our economy.

One in four families have been impacted by addiction and many working families are spending their entire lives' savings on rehab for their kids because opioids not only destroy the user but the entire family unit. Addicts will lie, cheat, steal, or kill to support their addiction. Over 60 % of the criminal cases in Pa are DUI drug cases or criminal acts committed while the person was under the influence or supporting an addiction. We have to fight the problem from all three established fronts: Treatment, law enforcement, and prevention.

We need treatment for those in recovery. By keeping people with an addiction in treatment, we decrease the chances of relapse because if they

relapse, they could commit a crime or influence other people including our youth.

We need Aggressive Drug Enforcement and Prosecution but you can't investigate, prosecute, or incarcerate the drug problem away.

However, I believe that the most important part of the solution to the problem is prevention.

Most people with an addiction began using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs at an early age. The earlier a young person uses alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; there is a greater risk of addiction. In fact, 80% of the people with an addiction started using alcohol tobacco or other drugs before they were 18. To decrease addiction and crimes committed by people with an addiction, we must increase prevention

Every week I see more and more young people with an addiction come into my courtroom with empty eyes - an indentured servant to the drug.

BRIEF HISTORY OF MY INVOLVEMENT WITH DRUG PREVENTION

I took office in 1994 and immediately became an advocate of prevention. Within 2 months of taking office, a 13-year-old girl came to Court for underage drinking. She drank vodka every morning before getting on the school bus. I never saw alcohol addiction at that level or at that age.

Therefore, I started visiting the schools and community organizations to talk about the harsh effects resulting from the early use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Then in 2000 everything changed for my program. I was the chairman of the local Lion's 4th grade drug prevention poster contest and the grand prize winning poster was titled "Drugs Kill Dreams"

I stole this title and made "Drugs Kill Dreams" the name of my program and the unofficial prevention slogan in Armstrong County.

In 2004, I enhanced this live prevention with prerecorded video prevention messages from

Steelers, Pirates, Penguins, law enforcement officials, physicians, testimonials from the surviving family members of deceased users, and individuals in recovery.

Every kid listens to someone different so my program has 15-20 different people talking about prevention.

The program's next milestone was in 2007 and it relates directly to our purpose today. I noticed Law Enforcement was spending extensive man hours and dollars trying to arrest dealers when the major source of highly addictive, lethal drugs was in the homes of unsuspecting legitimate users of pain relievers.

Therefore, in cooperation with the ACMH Foundation we did a prescription pain reliever alert and it was very effective.

We put this prevention message right in the hands of the legitimate users of pain relievers through the cooperation of Klingensmith Drug Stores. The pharmacies placed prevention materials in each pain reliever prescription bag.

2015-16 was the 15th anniversary of the Drugs Kill Dreams program. Following is a brief description of some other aspects of the program:

- Prevention resource guide distributed county wide
- DKD stickers were placed on the inside of all school buses in Armstrong and Freeport School Districts.
- All youth sports displayed the DKD slogan & logo
- Electronic billboards and banners displayed prevention messages
- Adult and youth drug prevention pledges signed by community members
- Pharmacies placed prevention materials in each pain reliever prescription bag and collected unused & expired medications

But the greatest impetus to the 15th Anniversary of my program and community prevention came last year when PA Senator Don White introduced a Resolution proclaiming Sunday, January 24, 2016, DKD day in PA. This Resolution raised the level of prevention awareness Statewide. An example of this occurred when the Dioceses of Greensburg and Pittsburgh as well as many of the other Armstrong County faith communities participated on that day with prevention messages.

There are many great prevention programs but I sincerely believe that I have the best prevention slogan in the Country: Drugs Kill Dreams.

THE PROBLEM

Basically, how are rural communities going to stop a heroin addict going to the city and buying 10 stamp bags – 5 for personal use and 5 for sale? Fifteen years ago when an individual was picked up with stamp bags of heroin, it was a big deal because we had a major dealer. Today, if an individual is picked up, that person is just an everyday user. We need to take a proactive approach because this is a problem that law enforcement cannot solve on its own.

Most Heroin addicts are first addicted to prescription pain relievers. We need to reduce the demand for Heroin by raising the level of prevention awareness for prescription pain relievers.

This has become a Statewide problem so we need a statewide solution with the exact same prevention

message statewide. I would respectfully suggest that we consider the following plan:

1. Ask Senator White to consider proposing another Drugs Kill Dreams day in PA with a prescription pain reliever alert.
2. Coordinate a Statewide prevention effort with the exact same message statewide
3. Ask for participation and cooperation from PA State police, the Attorney General's office, Area Agency on Aging and all other State agencies
4. Establish a county coordinator possibly the District Attorney from each county. Request each coordinator to utilize electronic billboards in his/her respective county.
5. Involve every school district in the State by having each district distribute and place information in their schools, news letters and electronic billboards at stadiums

6. Send out a statewide letter to the faith community asking for their support and include the message in their bulletins
7. Have Pharmacies distribute prevention material with every pain reliever prescription
8. Have Doctors and Dentists hand out prevention material with every pain reliever prescription
9. Have Hospitals help distribute prevention materials.
10. Coordinate a drug pick up day for unused & expired medications to coincide with the initiative.

A statewide, coordinated prevention plan could impact this epidemic.