



**NEW YORK STATE ALLIANCE
OF BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS, INC**

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE JOINT SENATE TASK FORCE ON
OPIOIDS, ADDICTION AND OVERDOSE PREVENTION**

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Good morning. My name is John Tunas and I am the Development Associate and Club Alumni for the Boys & Girls Club of Northern Westchester. Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about the growing public health crisis related to the use of dangerous substances, including but not limited to, opioids and heroin and about the effective efforts that are underway at Boys & Girls Clubs across the state to prevent substance use among the youth we serve.

Background on Boys & Girls Clubs: As a point of background, there are 126 Boys & Girls Club sites in New York State, serving nearly 150,000 youth. Boys & Girls Clubs fill the gap between school and home. We provide welcoming, positive environments in which kids and teens have fun, participate in life-changing programs and experiences, and build supportive relationships with peers and caring adults. Our Clubs are providing a wide array of proven prevention programs and services, all designed to help our youth live healthy and productive lives.

Our programs have demonstrated success: According to the most recent National Youth Risk Behavior Report (YRBR), youth who attend NYS Boys & Girls Clubs were more likely to abstain from binge drinking, illicit use of illegal drugs and other dangerous behaviors compared to other youth in New York State and nationally.

The Clubs are part of the New York State Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs, the organization representing all Clubs from around the State.

The Problem: It is clear-the use of opioids and heroin has become a public health crisis. It has touched nearly every community in our State. It impacts people of all ages, ethnic backgrounds and religions. The communities where our Clubs are located are no exception. Fortunately as indicated above, youth who attend our Clubs are significantly less likely to engage in substance use. Despite this fact, we see many youth who are at high-risk for using opioids, heroin and other extremely dangerous drugs based on many factors impacting their lives including the prevalence of poverty, crime, and gangs that could, without on-going positive youth development interventions lead them down a path of substance use.

A Solution: The New York State Alliance, based on research and the experience of our Clubs serving youth for decades, developed an innovative pilot drug prevention program that is designed to prevent youth who are at high-risk for substance use from engaging in this behavior. This pilot, which has already demonstrated success, is based on the following components:

- 1) Research has found that there is a strong link between those who have an underlying mental health problem and those who also use drugs. The research has further found that unless a person's underlying behavioral health issues are addressed, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent or stop drug use.
- 2) There already exists a large and effective network of Boys & Girls Club Clubs who are helping youth to lead positive and successful lives. To this end, building additional capacity as part of this strong and well-established infrastructure makes good programmatic and fiscal sense.
- 3) The Clubs have the youth, many of whom are at high-risk of eventually using drugs if their underlying mental health issues are not addressed.

It is based on these factors that the pilot drug prevention program was built.

The Drug Prevention Pilot Program:

The following are the components of the pilot program:

- Eight Clubs statewide were provided additional resources to:
 - Identify a cohort of youth who are already in their Clubs and considered high-risk for using substances; and
 - Identify high-risk youth that are not currently participating in a Club, but could likely benefit from the Club's prevention programming and services.
- Participating Clubs are utilizing an established mental health assessment tool designed to identify youth at high-risk for engaging in dangerous behaviors including, but not limited to heroin and opioids.
- Participating Clubs are working with parents to obtain their consent so that the results can be shared with the licensed children's behavioral health providers who will conduct outreach and engagement to begin to address the underlying mental health issues.
- Participating Clubs are using the funding to enhance and expand their prevention efforts for those youth who have been identified as being high-risk.
- Clubs are providing mental health services and training within the Club, or contracting with a licensed children's behavioral health provider.
- For youth not currently in a Club, additional resources are being targeted to engage these youth to encourage their participation in a Club.
- Participating Clubs are providing monitoring, mentoring and additional supports to help ensure these youth do not turn to substance use. This includes, but is not limited to, requiring these youth to participate in the Smarts Move program. This is a key component for all youth that are served by this initiative. This nationally recognized prevention

program has proven successful at helping youth avoid dangerous behaviors including drugs and alcohol.

- Metrics have been established to track data and outcomes to determine levels of success and areas for improvement based on national data collection tool by Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

Outcomes: Based on the funding that was provided by the legislature, 110 youth have been a part of this pilot program. Of these youth:

- 59% showed improvement on the mental health assessment at the end of the program;
- 98% abstained from drugs during the program;
- 96% had no involvement with the juvenile justice system; and
- 61% developed a plan to avoid drug use in the future.

Next Steps:

Based on the success of the pilot program and because this public health crisis continues, we are urging the Legislature to continue funding the Clubs who are in the pilot program while also providing additional funding for the remaining Clubs so they too can establish this effective enhanced drug prevention program.

Every day over 580,000 kids in New York leave school with nowhere to go. They risk being unsupervised, unguided and unsafe. If Clubs had the capacity to reach more youth, and provide them with successful enhanced drug prevention programming, we could begin to turn the tide on this public health crisis in NYS.

We look forward to continuing our strong working relationship with you as we all attempt to address this most urgent public health crisis. Again, we thank you for your interest and commitment.