

Four Ways to Include Prevention in Religious Programs

As a religious and educational leader in your community, you are well aware of the problems that youth face growing up in America today. Illicit drug use, as well as the underage use of alcohol, continues at high levels among teenagers. Drug use affects everyone—communities, families and individuals—and instilling strong values, which are rooted for many in religious faith, is a protective factor in preventing many high-risk behaviors.

Despite the scope of the problems, your leadership has already made a difference. Research shows that youth who participate in a religious community are less likely to use alcohol and other drugs. In many ways, your existing youth programs—retreats, summer programs, and other supervised activities—are effective forms of substance abuse prevention. Youth turn to faith communities for spiritual guidance about such issues as peer pressure, relationships and drugs. Likewise, parents and caregivers turn to faith communities for help in communicating their values and keeping young people safe.

Traditionally, the faith community has been at the forefront of responding to the immediate social and human services needs of individuals and communities. You provide food and clothing for the needy, You shelter the homeless. You offer drug treatment, referral services and support groups for members struggling to keep the faith. When it comes to preventing substance abuse, you also play an important role.

1. ELEVATE SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION ON YOUR FAITH AGENDA

- **Renew** or **establish** a strong position statement and policies against illicit drug use and underage alcohol and tobacco use.
- **Take a public stand** and make your position about substance abuse prevention known.
- **Partner** with community-based, private and nonprofit organizations that have substance abuse prevention programs.
- **Collaborate** with local seminaries, divinity schools and other religious institutions. Encourage them to include youth substance abuse prevention and counseling in their curricula.

2. PUT SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION MESSAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR FAITH AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

- **Incorporate** substance abuse prevention messages into your sermon series, homilies, newsletters, media ministries, religious education and parenting classes, retreats, camps, and other youth and parent events.
- **Launch** a local campaign to promote your faith community's commitment to substance abuse prevention.
- **Develop** or customize educational materials that put substance abuse prevention information in the context of your religious beliefs.
- **Select** a day, a week or a month to celebrate your faith community's commitment to substance abuse prevention.

3. HELP YOUTH SORT OUT THE MEANING IN MESSAGES

- **Incorporate** media literacy lessons into religious education and youth programs, so that youth can understand the subtle and not-so-subtle messages conveyed in the pop-culture media of music, television and movies. Help youth become more critical consumers of media information.
- **Educate** parents and others about the importance of helping kids analyze the media.
- **Include** activities that promote critical awareness of the media.

4. LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO SPREAD THE WORD

- **Develop** partnerships with area faith- and community-based organizations as a way of coordinating training programs and sharing information and substance abuse prevention educational resources that have proven to be effective.
- **Contact** national, state and/or community alcohol and drug programs for technical assistance and guidance on ways to develop or enhance your existing substance abuse prevention programs.
- **Let local media know** about your initiatives.
- **Include** special sections on your organizations website to promote youth and parenting outreach and substance abuse prevention programs.

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