

FAMILIES TURN TO `KIDS' TO GET TEENS OFF DRUGS

Deseret News, The (Salt Lake City, UT) - April 18, 1988

- Author/Byline: Ivan M. Lincoln, Staff Writer
- Edition: Metro
- Section: Today
- Page: C3

There are no "instant miracles" in weaning teenagers from drugs.

But several Utah families are hoping that a River Edge, N.J., treatment program with an 80 percent success rate "Kids of Bergen County, Inc." can be established sometime this year in the Greater Salt Lake area and provide another way to steer their children away from drug abuse.

The program, founded by author/psychotherapist Dr. Miller Newton, was described during a recent gathering of parents, health experts and church leaders in Farmington. The program costs about half that of many other drug treatment facilities.

Children from 18 Utah families are enrolled in the New Jersey program. These and other families are raising funds to bring the program to Utah, with the assistance and coordination of Marie George, Bountiful, chairwoman of the board of directors of "Kids of the Great Salt Lake, Inc."

For some families, government-subsidized mental health programs seem to do the job. For others, an intensive hospitalization-type program works.

But Newton, in developing his program and after surviving a traumatic drug situation with one of his children discovered that treatment geared toward adults rarely works with teenagers.

Many hospital programs take the youths off the streets for six weeks or until the insurance runs out then, when they're supposedly "cured," simply drop them back into society with a "sink or swim" attitude. Most of the teenagers coming out of these programs are back into their old lifestyles within a few days and the family is back at Square One.

Newton's program, to describe it simply, is an economical combination of Alcoholics Anonymous, peer pressure and Tough Love. The youths are removed from their environment usually through intervention but they're not institutionalized.

In addition "Kids" includes up to two years of followup care, monitoring the youths' progress and working on job recruitment to ensure they can make it on their own.

Newton insists on total family involvement in the treatment process. "Kids" focuses on rebuilding a strong family relationship. The youths in his program aren't just dumped in a hospital, then left there. While there may be some savings in the amount of money expended for the treatment, the family is expected to sacrifice a great deal of time and effort.

For families who live in the immediate Bergen County, N.J., area, the requirements are a little different and more involved than for those who bring their children in from across the country. But if you talk to any of the Utah families with children in the program, you'll find that while they're spending a lot of time and money on cross-country trips and airline tickets, they feel it's all well spent.

When a Utah child is first enrolled in the program, their families attend for three weekends in a row, after which they travel to New Jersey about once a month. The ages of youths in the program range from 12 to 24.

The Utah families fly out to New Jersey about once every four or five weeks to attend therapy sessions on Fridays and Mondays. The Utahns also have a local support group which meets on Wednesdays in the Salt Lake and Davis county areas.

The "Kids" program has recently been implemented in Southern California and in El Paso, Texas. It took Californians about 2 1/2 years to raise the necessary funds to establish the program there, while it took the Texans about 1 1/2 years. Newton sees similarities in the situations of El Paso and Salt Lake City both are smaller cities and not quite as affluent as the areas in New Jersey and California. In fact, El Paso was considered economically depressed. But once the entire community got fired-up about the prospect of having its own "Kids" program, the fund-raising effort really took off, he said.

Newton expects that it will take roughly \$150,000 just to start the program in Utah, plus about \$350,000 to \$400,000 to renovate and equip an existing building and keep the program running for the first year.

A program capable of handling 80 youths would require three adult therapists with master's degrees in related psychiatric/counseling fields; 7-8 peer counselors (youths who've gone through the program themselves and who have been trained by Newton's staff), a full-time "intake" coordinator (usually an understanding mother, who can work with the new families and help comfort them in the process),

some full- and part-time clerical and consultation help, and one person to supervise the kitchen.

One treatment program graduate will also be selected as a sort of "straw boss" to supervise the peer pressure program.

One unusual aspect of the program is that the youths do not stay overnight in the treatment facility. Instead, the newcomers (Phase One) are assigned to individual youths in higher phases of the program. They spend 12 hours a day, seven days a week, at the counseling center, then go to their newly assigned home with their "peer pressure" companion.

And, during this first phase, the newcomers never leave the sight of their companions. Even walking down the halls of the counseling center, they are required to hold onto the belt of the companion ahead of them.

Newton says that since most teenagers get into trouble because of negative peer pressure, his program utilizes just the opposite positive peer pressure as an integral part of the treatment process.

In later phases the youths are allowed to return to school or to work but are expected to report to the counseling facility on a daily basis.

Near the end of the treatment usually several months the teenagers report to the center less frequently and are expected to learn to manage their own free time, with family and friends as their support group.

Newton expects that the average fee for the Utah facility, once it has been established, will be in the neighborhood of \$600 a month. Some hospitalization programs run as high as \$2,000 to \$3,000 a month. Some families have to mortgage their homes in order to foot the bill for these programs.

The "Kids" program also puts a cap on the amount of services families are required to pay for. After 15 months, there is only a monthly assessment for meals (less than \$100). And if a youngster falls off the wagon, he can be readmitted to the program without additional charge (except for meals). The program deals not only with drug and chemical abuse, but with other compulsive behavior disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia.

The program also tries to challenge teenagers to set higher goals. Newton and his staff make some real demands on the youths.

"Kids today need to be challenged," he firmly believes. For the past 20 years or so, parents and society have been mollycoddling youths. Even textbooks are less complex than they were several years ago and children today are simply bored, Newton says.

He also strictly enforces a conservative dress code boys must have short haircuts and no beards or facial hair. Also, the girls in the program cannot wear gaudy jewelry or bizarre fashions. Because of the positive peer pressure, the youths quickly learn that by changing their appearance, they can also begin to change their lifestyles.

For example, if a new girl comes into the program and tries flaunting her streetwise demeanor, the boys are quick to respond by informing her that they no longer associate with girls who dress and act that way. And the same thing happens with boys who think they're "cool."

Newton is author of two books, "Not My Kid: A Parent's Guide to Kids and Drugs" and "Gone Way Down: Teenage Drug-Use Is a Disease."

He is the former executive director of the Florida Alcohol Coalition and consultant to the National Institute of Mental Health.

"Kids of the Great Salt Lake" generally encompasses the Wasatch Front region, but youths from neighboring states could also be included in the local program once it is established. "Kids" is a non-profit, tax exempt program.

For information on the program, contact Marie George at 295-7745. Or write to: Kids of the Great Salt Lake; P.O. Box 837; Centerville, UT 84014.

- Record: 8804180060
- Copyright: Copyright (c) 1988 Deseret News Publishing Company