

THE WINDHAM EAGLE

NEWSPAPER

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"Taking Back Maine's Future": Ending the opiate crisis

By Craig Bailey

On Tuesday, March 5, Windham Middle School's seventh graders participated in an assembly kicking off the project, Taking Back Maine's Future: Ending the Opiate Crisis. This second annual program was hosted by Be The Influence, whose Mission is to promote community collaboration and positive choices in reducing youth substance use.

The assembly featured Janet Mills' newly appointed substance misuse expert Gordon Smith as well as a panel of experts from law enforcement and prevention including: Kevin Schofield, Windham's Chief of Police; Jonathan Sahrbeck, Cumberland County District Attorney; Bridget Rauscher, City of Portland Public Health; Bill Andrew, Windham Police Patrol Captain; John Kooistra, Windham's Deputy Fire Chief; Nicole Raye-Ellis, Project Coordinator for Be the Influence.



A panel of experts speak to the students

Seventh grade teacher Doug Elder kicked off the assembly sharing an overview that this project-based learning is developed to look into issues that are most impactful to the students. "We decided to take a look at Maine's opiate crisis, viewing students as community members who can make an impact," Elder began. "We'll educate together with Be The Influence, law enforcement, the medical field and state government. This is not only about information, but also transformation of our community."

Be The Influence's highly enthusiastic Executive Director, Laura Morris, offered a few opiate-related questions to students who eagerly provided their responses, which confirmed some basic understanding of opiates.

Gordon Smith reinforced how thrilled the Governor is with the school's choice of this project and how honored he is to help launch it.

Smith stated, "The opioid crisis is about addictions. Finding out why people abuse substances." He then asked, "Why are we educating about this at the seventh grade level?" to which he provided the answer, "Because that is the age people often begin abusing substances. It is important to educate now as you have your whole life ahead of you. You have the opportunity to help the State of Maine stop the biggest public health crisis of our time."

Smith shared statistics to help the audience appreciate the magnitude of the problem, indicating that in Maine, "in 2017, 417 people died of an overdose. That's more than one per day. Last year, 2018, numbers were lower due to the use of Narcan." He further explained that Narcan is used for the reversal of opioid overdose.

Another statistic shared was, "of the 13,000 annual births in Maine, during 2018, the mother of 908 babies was an addict. Not only do we need to help the mother, we must also help the babies recover

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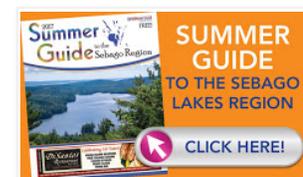
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from addiction."

A final, staggering, statistic shared by Smith was the number of people who died of an overdose last year in the USA: 72,000. Smith stated, "that means that in the time I've been standing here, at least 2 people have died of an overdose."

Each of the panel members shared highly impactful perspectives. Schofield indicated, "Last year, in Windham, we saved over 30 people from an overdose, with Narcan."

Sahrbeck offered a profound perspective by asking, "Is there anything in life you love?" to which students responded with: family, friends, pets. Sahrbeck then shared, "What if something could alter your brain to cause you to focus on (love) something else? That is what opioids do. They rewire your brain, changing your priorities, leading you down a path you didn't realize you'd go."

One of the most impactful perspectives was shared by Raye-Ellis, an addict in recovery for eight years, stating, "I was in your shoes. My school never covered anything on addiction. If they had done something like this, I could have seen a visual of what the path of addiction looks like." A round of applause ensued.

In closing, Elder spoke directly to the students, "If you've ever asked, when will they start treating me like an adult? Well, it is right now. Simple answers to this problem will not work. We are going to talk through tough questions. There will be some difficult conversations. This will call for you to invest your time, energy and imagination. This issue is going to come for you whether you are ready or not. We want to make you ready."

Queuing up the project, Elder relays, "The student's job involves traveling through time via research and evaluation of current data and statistics, bringing newspapers back from the future: some from the bright promising future where Maine has defeated the epidemic - others from the dark and dangerous future."

The assembly closed with the admonition, "What we do today and in the coming years to solve the opioid crisis; to help addicts, to find new solutions, legally, socially, and personally, will determine Maine's future."

Posted by [Lorraine Glowczak](#) at 8:13 PM



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