

Group, Lawmakers Tackle Teen Drug Abuse

By COLIN POITRAS | Courant Staff Writer
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Greg W. thought he was safe partying with prescription drugs like Xanax, Vicodin and Percocet when he was in his middle teens.

Doctors prescribed them, so they must be all right, Greg thought. And at least he wasn't out on the street copping cocaine, heroin or weed like a "real" drug addict.

But, Greg told legislators and advocates Wednesday, his casual use of a dose here and there at school or at parties quickly turned into raids on his friends' medicine cabinets and an increasing reliance on the numbing effects of his favorite drug of choice, OxyContin, by the time he was 17.

Greg's twisted reality came to a crashing halt in July 2001 when he wrapped his car around a tree in Newtown. The inside of the car was covered in blood, the windshield shattered. Police found Greg blocks away at a Dunkin' Donuts — high as a kite and covered in blood. He was missing his front teeth.

Greg's story is not unique. It is estimated that 16,000 adolescents between 12 and 17 need treatment for substance abuse in Connecticut; another 18,000 need treatment for alcoholism. Nationally, one in five teens say they have abused prescription painkillers and other prescription medicine, according to the latest research by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

Greg, now 24 and sober for six years, spoke to state legislators and members of a newly formed advocacy group, Connecticut Turning to Families, that is trying to raise awareness of teenage substance abuse.

The group, made up of concerned parents, treatment counselors and experienced professionals, intends to lobby state officials to increase access to adolescent substance abuse counseling programs and improve the quality of existing programs. On Wednesday, advocates described reductions in funding, reluctant insurance companies and other barriers to improving treatment. Many teenagers don't get treatment until they get arrested for crimes related to their substance abuse and wind up in juvenile court, organizers said.

"We can't continue to ignore this; lives are at stake," said Ginger Katz, whose 20-year-old son Ian died from a heroin overdose in 1996. An autopsy showed Ian also had Valium in his system when he died.

Three East Haven High School students were taken to a local hospital two weeks ago after authorities learned that at least one of them had taken Klonopin, a prescription drug used to treat convulsive disorders, police said. Last July, a 17-year-old Southington High School student was arrested by police and accused of selling large quantities of OxyContin both in and outside school.

House Republican leader Lawrence Cafero knows the prevalence of teenage substance abuse all too well. An expulsion officer with the Norwalk school system, Cafero said he has dealt with kids who got caught with marijuana and a 15-year-old who was selling bags of heroin and making \$1,000 a day. He's seen a kid's face ripped open with a box cutter over drugs and dealt with a kid who plunged a knife into his mother because she wouldn't let him go out.

"This is an issue that crosses party lines," said Cafero, who successfully passed legislation two years ago requiring individuals to show identification when picking up any narcotic prescription at a pharmacy.

While Cafero said it is unlikely there will be any immediate changes proposed when the legislature reconvenes in February, he praised Turning to Families for raising awareness and entering the discussion.

"Do our kids have to get so bad, so involved in substance abuse that they commit crimes and get arrested to get treatment?" asked Hal Gibber, executive director of FAVOR Inc., a parent and family advocacy group. "We want to see where the gaps in services are, where the equity issues are and where new investments need to be made."