

## 1 Focus On Prevention

## 4 A Gem of a Program in Southeast Los Angeles

## 6 Playing Around Late at Night . . . for Prevention

## 7 Q&amp;A with Kathryn Kenhower

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# A FOCUS ON PREVENTION

READ A NEWSPAPER, WATCH TELEVISION, OR LISTEN TO THE RADIO and you cannot help but encounter stories about the problems related to alcohol and other drug use. How can this harm be reduced? One strategy is to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

In Los Angeles County, the Alcohol and Drug Program Administration of the Department of Health Services is working to do just that. It currently oversees 37 prevention contracts with 37 different community groups. The groups, with assistance and support from ADPA, implement prevention programs in their communities. Funding for these programs comes from the federal government and California state government under the auspices of the county government.

The current prevention program began in 1995, when the Los Angeles County Board

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"We heard from community coalitions and prevention organizations that they wanted comprehensive, community-based programs," says Yolanda Cordero, section head for prevention at ADPA. So, from the 150 applications it received, ADPA awarded 28 contracts to community-based organizations that geared prevention

work to a specific community's needs and goals. It awarded an additional seven contracts in subsequent years to organizations that work with high-risk youths. Although the contracts initially were scheduled to run for three years, the County has since extended them.

In promoting community-based prevention work (called a community prevention model) ADPA recognizes that it is the residents of a community, not government agencies or outside entities, who

can best determine what actions will be most effective in reducing the harm caused by alcohol and other drug use.

"All communities are different," says Cordero, "and community members need to be involved throughout the planning and implementation process."

In addition to being geared to individual community needs, the community prevention model views each community as being in its own state of development. For example, some may be more organized and sophisticated than others. Some may develop more slowly than others. Each community begins at a different point and proceeds at a different pace.

The first step in developing a community-based prevention plan is assessing the needs



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of Supervisors asked ADPA to solicit prevention contracts. In preparation for the contract selection process, ADPA convened a summit meeting of people who had worked in the prevention field to provide advice and counsel on what kind of prevention work would be most effective in reducing problems.

## ... FOR PREVENTION

player becomes angry during a game, Gervais talks to him about how to control his emotions. Players learn to improve their "self-talk," which is the way they talk to themselves during a game. They learn positive self-talk and they are taught to not call themselves losers, to not "beat themselves up."

Often, Gervais asks players to set goals for a better performance in an upcoming game. Then at his next contact, he asks whether the goal was met.

"We start with baby steps," he says. "Then we transfer it to goals in school and goals in life."

Eventually, some of the players begin to write down their goals. That is when they realize how much they have learned from Late Night Sports. According to Gervais, that's also how they get "direction and purpose."

Ramos, for one, says that he has gained a lot from the program. He has learned to be ambitious, patient and self-sufficient. And he has learned teamwork and trust.

When he is not at the South Bay Youth Project, Gervais works with professional and Olympic athletes as a sports psychologist. The strategies he teaches these paying clients are identical to the ones he teaches his young basketball players. But at Late Night Sports, the strategies are taught for free. Gervais delights in telling this to the basketball players.

Sometimes, professional basketball players from the National Basketball Association, the Continental Basketball Association, the Women's National Basketball Association, or amateur players from elite colleges come to Late Night Sports to participate in the games.

"We don't invite them," says Gervais. "They just know about it."

Late Night Sports is unique. Although officials from nearby communities have observed the program, they have been unable to duplicate its combination of lessons in psychological skills training from a professional sports psychologist and basketball.

Many communities, however, do sponsor midnight basketball programs aimed at getting a high-risk youth population off the streets on Saturday nights. These programs are popular, but they are different from Late Night Sports. In fact, Late Night Sports began as midnight basketball, which Gervais describes as a program that "felt hollow, like a missed opportunity" and evolved into a program that, according to Gervais, "presents youth with tools and skills."

Gervais calls Late Night Sports a success, "one of the most powerful tools that shapes the lives of the participants that enter the gym."

Ramos agrees.

"It changes the character of people," he says. "And besides that, it's fun. People go to play basketball and without even thinking about it, they are learning." □

*Editor's note: For more information about Late Night Sports, visit their Website at [www.drugfreeteens.org](http://www.drugfreeteens.org)*

## Q&A

### WITH KATHRYN ICENHOWER

*Kathryn Icenhower has been executive director of SHIELDS for Families since the organization was founded in 1991 to help pregnant women with alcohol and other drug problems in the Watts and Compton neighborhoods.*



*In her decade at its helm, Icenhower has helped SHIELDS grow into an award-winning, comprehensive prevention and treatment program for central Los Angeles families. She spoke recently with Prevention File about her organization and why prevention is so important in resolving alcohol, tobacco and other drug problems.*

#### How did SHIELDS for Families get its start?

**A:** We began working with substance-abusing, perinatal women because a study had found that in the Watts/Compton area, 1,200 babies were born every year who had been substance-exposed. This was an extremely high number, and we wanted to do something about it.

But, in working with these women, we quickly learned that they and their children had many needs that weren't being addressed. Their alcohol and other drug problems didn't happen overnight. Often, these women had a long history not only of alcohol and drug use, but also of physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. On average, they were reading at a fourth-grade level.

They didn't just have one or two children, but four or five, and their children had usually been in and out of their homes, in foster care. These children were having academic and behavioral problems. Some were already in the criminal justice system, and some were already using alcohol and other drugs.

Alcohol and other drug problems are family problems. Research shows that children of substance-abusing parents are more likely to develop such problems themselves. These children are the highest-risk group there is when it comes to this issue and other issues. We felt we needed to work with whole families to prevent these problems from passing down through generations.

#### How does this help with prevention?

**A.** We are working to break the cycle of family alcohol and other drug problems and are proactive in the movement to save children from an almost inevitable path of further problems. Our Heroes & Sheras program empowers 50 youths 10 to 17 by offering individual and group sessions, cultural enrichment, alcohol and substance abuse education, recreational activities, educational support.

Program activities focus on developing a cadre of youth leaders in their school and home communities. We believe that "re-empowered" youth grow into "re-empowered adults and that a "re-empowered" community has the greater potential of bringing about positive change. And our leadership development workshops provide community youths with an awareness of their community responsi-