

## The Cost of Substance Abuse in West Virginia: Are We Spending our Money Wisely?

An old folktale goes something like this:

*One summer in a village town, the townspeople gathered for a picnic by the river. As they leisurely shared food and conversation, a baby was seen in the river, struggling and crying and about to drown. Someone rushed to save the baby. Then more screaming babies appeared, and the townspeople rushed to save them too. With great effort they began to organize their activities in order to save the babies as they came down the river. Suddenly, a townsman started to run away along the shore of the river. "Where are you going?" shouted one of the rescuers. "We need you here to help save these babies!" The townsman replied, "I'm going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!"*

Last year, a national panel of substance abuse policy experts released a [report](#) recommending policies to improve the ways states organize and deliver substance abuse prevention and treatment. Their message to state leaders was clear and straightforward. "Pay attention to alcohol and drugs because they are the root of the most expensive and serious problems in all your human services and criminal justice agencies."

In a recent [report](#) for the West Virginia Bureau for Behavioral Health and Health Facilities, the Public Consulting Group estimated that the combined cost of substance abuse related issues in WV is **\$1.86 BILLION** dollars per year. This is approximately \$1,000.00 per year for every man, woman, and child in the state, or about \$320 a month for a family of four. This is a staggering amount to pay, particularly for a problem that is largely preventable. The report did not address how much of this cost was spent directly on preventing or treating substance abuse.

In 2001 the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University [reported](#) that for "every dollar states spent on substance abuse, 96 cents went to shovel up the wreckage in state programs and only four cents went to prevent and treat the problem." It's hard to imagine that this pennywise, pound-foolish approach is the way WV taxpayers would prefer to spend their money.

Abuse and addiction involving illegal and prescription drugs, alcohol, and tobacco are involved in virtually every domestic problem our state and nation faces: crime, cancer, heart disease, lung disease, AIDS, cirrhosis, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, chronic welfare, learning disabilities, conduct disorders, poor school performance, and many others. Nearly every sector of our society spends hefty sums cleaning up the wreckage caused by substance abuse.

The cost of not preventing and/or treating substance abuse falls heavily on the Governor, the legislature, and the taxpayers of the state. According to the CASA report, in WV the burden that substance abuse imposes on our public programs is estimated at nearly 96 cents of every dollar. The regulation of substances and enforcement of laws accounts for only two cent per dollar, and prevention and treatment accounts for only another two cents per dollar. The negative consequences of substance abuse are among the largest costs in the state's budget, although their impact and exact cost are

hidden within the state budgets for criminal justice, education, health care, child welfare, mental health, highway safety, and others.

Perhaps the cruelest reality is the state substance abuse spending on children. Research shows that if a child reaches age 21 without using tobacco, alcohol, or illegal drugs, chances are that he or she never will. Yet we spend approximately 113 times more to clean up the mess of substance abuse than we spend on encouraging children to stay away from these substances in the first place.

In West Virginia, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. The WV Governor's Office and the state legislature are beginning to take notice. In March of 2006, the legislature passed [House Bill 4488](#) and established the WV Comprehensive Behavioral Commission "to study the current behavioral health system, including substance abuse and domestic violence when those conditions have an effect upon or are impacted by the system."

In May 2004, the previous Governor established [Executive Order No. 8-04](#) and created the West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Well-Being. The Order established the Partnership as the state's designated substance abuse prevention and intervention planning body. The Partnership is a body of approximately 30 individuals, appointed by the Governor, who represent the agencies in state government that deliver services to deal with the burden substance abuse poses on our state.

The Partnership began as a requirement of a five-year, \$11.7 million federal [grant](#) received by the Governor's Office from the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#). Over the past two years, the Partnership gathered data and identified the counties with the highest levels of overall substance abuse problems. Knowing that state-level attention to prevention is essential but solutions to the substance abuse epidemic originate and culminate through local-level participation, the Partnership funded year-long planning grants for counties. This funding went to the participating counties to further assess their substance abuse problems and develop a comprehensive plan to implement evidence-based prevention strategies. In all, fifty-three of the states 55 counties participated and as a result local prevention partnerships now exist in nearly every county in the state. These partnerships are actively recruiting members and encouraging citizen participation.

In the coming year, the Partnership will invest roughly 85% of its yearly budget, approximately \$1.6 million, to fund substance abuse prevention efforts in the 12 or more counties that are among those with the highest overall need in the state for substance abuse prevention. Compared to what the state spends to clean up the mess of substance abuse, this amount of investment is a pittance. It is a start, though, and the overall effort is beginning to show promise.

With increased resources from the state and federal government, and leadership from the Governor's Office and state legislature, this effort could potentially have a dramatic impact—an impact that could significantly reduce the financial burden of substance abuse on the state and improve the lives of the citizens of West Virginia.

We know what does and doesn't work in reducing substance abuse in West Virginia. So the question for all West Virginians is simple...do we want to continue to pay the enormous costs of the consequences of substance abuse and addiction or do we want to invest our resources in treating and preventing it from occurring in the first

place? Do we really want to continue to put all our time and money into pulling babies out of the water without stopping them from being thrown into the river in the first place?

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