

Judge and agency battling perception that pot use is cool

With juvenile marijuana use on the rise, Forsyth County Reclaiming Futures of is working hard to connect teens with the resources they need to get clean.

According to the 2011 Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 26 percent of high school students had used marijuana in the last 30 days, up from 22 percent in 2009.

The local agency follows the national Reclaiming Futures model, offering individually tailored treatment and support programs for youth whose battles with substance abuse (and sometimes mental health) have led to entanglements with the juvenile justice system.

“The earlier the onset of any type of substance use, the more likely a person is to develop an issue down the road and have a dependence problem,” Reclaiming Futures Program Director Mina Cook said.

According to the agency, 67 percent of young people in the Forsyth County juvenile justice system have a substance abuse problem and more than 90 percent of adults with substance abuse issues started using before they were 18; half of them started before age 15. The agency’s Juvenile Drug Treatment Coordinator Mark Kinney and Dr. Sam Gray, a psychologist who facilitates Reclaiming Futures treatment programs, secured a grant last year to offer the Reclaiming Futures Juvenile Drug Treatment Court program. Forsyth County had been without such a court since 2011, when funding to offer it lapsed.

Thirty-three of the agency’s young clients are required to come before District Court Judge Denise Hartsfield every other week as part of their treatment.

“Really our goal is to get these kids into treatment as soon as possible and make sure they attend treatment,” Kinney said.

Those in the drug court program, 80 percent of whom are black, go through treatment, are required to perform community service and write a paper. They are paired with an adult mentor once they’ve made progress. They’re also regularly tested for drugs.

Hartsfield said that the 33 in her court, almost all boys, are marijuana users. Though not addicted, she said they have a hard time staying off the drug. Hartsfield believes today’s teens have a different perception of marijuana than previous generations.

“This generation believes that marijuana is not illegal for whatever reason; it’s generational,” she said. **“They come from neighborhoods and homes where marijuana is an everyday thing.”**

Hartsfield said many times the teens see their parents and siblings use it or they see others use it on social media. She added because musicians like Lil’ Wayne, Snoop Lion (formerly Snoop Dogg) and T.I. sing about it, smoking weed is a sort of status symbol to young people.

But Hartsfield said marijuana can be very serious business that can lead to a possession, minor distribution (if the drug is given to friends) and/or drug paraphernalia charges. The median age of teens in drug court is 15-and-a-half, just shy of when they can be charged as an adult at 16.

Gray said that some youth feel encouraged to smoke pot by the push to legalize the drug. He said if youth think it’s okay to use pot because it has been legalized in Colorado and Washington, they are getting the wrong message.

“The biggest challenge is that while states have legalized it for adults, I don’t think anybody would tell you that it’s okay for kids to use, that it doesn’t have a negative impact on kids’ brains because the science, as well as everything else we’ve seen, suggests that it does,” Gray said.

The drug court, which began in January, has a goal of having its young participants drug free for 90 days. It has yet to achieve that goal, but Gray said the initial findings are very encouraging so far.

September is Recovery Month and Recovering Futures will hold a celebration on Saturday, Sept. 28 at the Children’s Home, 1001 Reynolda Road, from 1-5 p.m. It will feature food, music and games. Photos taken by teens in treatment, representing their journeys to recovery, will be unveiled and auctioned off.