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SEDGWICK COUNTY, KANSAS
COMMUNICATIONS

NEWS

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August 14, 2007

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Understanding Alcoholism as a Community Issue

September is National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month. To promote the hopeful and healing message of recovery, COMCARE of Sedgwick County's Addiction Treatment Services (ATS) is participating in the 18th annual observance of this event.

In Sedgwick County alone, approximately 29,940 residents have a substance-use disorder and although treatment and other support services can guide them through recovery from this disease, only an estimated 18% of these residents have accessed our area's treatment centers. Stigma, fear of job loss, humiliation, cost and insurance barriers present obstacles to those who need treatment.

Alcoholism is a topic that receives a fairly steady stream of attention in the general media, and in everyday conversations. Yet, perhaps for most people, alcoholism is not understood realistically. Most people tend to think in terms of its most extreme manifestations, including job loss, homelessness, financial destitution, etc. While all of these tragic outcomes can and do occur in the lives of advanced alcoholics, this is not the picture of the "typical alcoholic." In fact there is no typical alcoholic. Although it is true that alcoholism is known to occur at different rates of frequency among various ethnic groups, it occurs to some extent in every group at every socioeconomic level. Therefore, the "typical alcoholic" is a middle-class person who works or goes to school, has a family and attends worship services on Sunday.

Alcohol abuse and alcoholism perhaps is best described as a maladaptive pattern of regular, frequent and immoderate use of alcohol. The emphasis to be noted here is that this is a medical disorder with a strong behavioral component. Unlike other psychological problems, it is not defined in terms of how someone feels or thinks, but primarily in terms of the pattern of behaviors related to alcohol consumption.

Research demonstrates that substance-use disorders are medical conditions and can be effectively treated, just as many illnesses are treatable. A major study published in 2000 in the Journal of the American Medical Association is one of several articles that reports the effectiveness of treatment for substance-use disorders. The study found

that treatments for drug-use disorders are just as effective as treatment for other chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure, asthma and diabetes.

Investing in treatment for substance-use disorders is necessary to ensure the health and well-being of our community. Alcohol use is responsible for increased violence and crime, decreased worker productivity, higher health insurance premiums, and deaths and injuries from drinking and driving accidents. Drinkers alone do not pay these costs – everyone splits the bill. The return on investment is conservatively calculated as: for every \$1 spent on treatment, \$7 is saved in social costs.

Alcoholism is also known as a family disease. Every individual with a drinking problem disrupts the lives of at least four other people. While it is important for the family to support the alcoholic's recovery, it is also important for members of the family to get involved in their own recovery.

Of the 20.2 million adults classified with dependence or abuse in 2005, 15.5 million (or 76.7 percent) were employed. While treatment for substance-use disorders is cost effective and beneficial to the person in need, if left untreated, these disorders can negatively impact all aspects of business, including financial losses, absenteeism, and the morale of other employees.

When a person in the justice system finds treatment, the outlook is remarkable. Re-arrest rates drop from 75 percent to 27 percent. This decrease in the recidivism rate and the proven effectiveness of treatment has enormous effects in reducing the cost burden of the community.

When doors are open to recovery, more people will seek treatment for substance-use disorders. COMCARE Addiction Treatment Services is dedicated to ensure that treatment services are readily available to those who need them and recognize the achievements of those who seek treatment and celebrate their successes.

Treatment Works!

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