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## Officials tout prevention to combat addiction

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LANDER -- It's like the old parable about the woman who lives by the ocean and is a strong swimmer.

Every winter day she sees a different woman flailing in the water, drowning from the weight of her overcoat and boots, and every day she exhausts herself risking her life to swim out and save the drowning woman, never thinking to go down to the pier to stop the man who every morning keeps grabbing a different woman and throwing her in.

Conventional wisdom says that in order to make real progress in the struggle against drug and alcohol abuse, Wyomingites will need to take a fresh approach that productively integrates not only treatment and law enforcement but an equally important measure of preventing the problem before it starts.

Prevention has the greatest potential to effect major change, and to save the cities, the counties, and the state of Wyoming heaps of money.

This is the argument, at least, made by those working locally on the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse. If you do a better job of preventing the problem in the first place, according to their line of reasoning, you will spend a lot less time and fewer resources treating and/or arresting and incarcerating people as consequences of the problem.

An October 2004 study done by the Southwest Prevention Center of the University of Oklahoma supports the argument. Among the primary findings of the OU study is that "for every dollar spent on prevention programs, from \$2 to \$20 are returned in benefits ... resulting from reduced demand for health and social services."

Spending more money on prevention in Wyoming would signify something of a paradigm shift, one that prevention workers at the local level would surely welcome.

"We have to be more pro-active," said Terry Myers, president of Wyoming Meth Defense and program director of Lander's Change Attitudes Now. CAN works to offer children positive and constructive options to the damaging behaviors of youthful drug and alcohol use. When the children join the program, they sign a contract pledging not to use drugs or alcohol.

"Enforcement and treatment are important, but they're reactive," Myers said. "The way our society has always been, it's always been reactive. When you take a reactive approach you're never doing anything about the core problem -- you're just treating the symptoms."

Rodger McDaniel, the new head of the substance abuse division of the Wyoming Department of Health, said focusing on prevention is a recent trend in Wyoming.

"At the time we started working on this program (a statewide strategy to address the problems of substance abuse, beginning in 2001), of that three-legged stool, law enforcement was already pretty strong," he said. "In 2002 we built significantly on the treatment leg ... It is now that we're starting to do a lot more with prevention."

Prevention initiatives were supposed to have started much sooner, but local and global events worked against their implementation early on. After the 9/11 attacks, for example, most of the federal money that was originally intended for drug interdiction was shifted to anti-terrorism measures. Something had to fall by the wayside, which tended to be prevention.

A rise in the use of methamphetamine also shifted focus.

Lawmakers worked in the recent legislative session to address the growing problem of a statewide dearth of treatment options. The 2007 Mental Health and Substance Abuse Appropriations Act included funding for 106 new residential treatment beds. With that need soon to be finally addressed, the state now can turn more of its attention to prevention, which remains the short leg of the stool, officials say.

McDaniel said prevention needs to move beyond traditional thinking -- beyond stand-alone programs such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education.

“The state has to look at prevention in a new way,” McDaniel said, adding that the best sort of prevention includes making sure that all students can read well in the third grade, and that children are set up for success in school as early as possible. One of the leading precursors of alcohol and drug use among children is academic failure.

One of the focuses now for the Department of Health is what it calls “community empowerment,” the point of which is to aid local prevention groups. They include Lander’s CAN, as well as private industry initiatives such an anti-meth project spearheaded by Marathon Oil in Gillette, Cody and Sheridan.