

# COMING TOGETHER TO PREVENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Thanks to the generosity of donors and the hard work of local organizations and residents, a new initiative is making a measurable impact in its mission to combat the high rate of substance abuse in the Northwest Corner of Connecticut.

Berkshire Taconic's **Northwest Corner Fund** and the **Foundation for Community Health** have invested in the Botvin LifeSkills Program, an evidence-based approach to substance abuse prevention, in the Region One School District. They have also supported the mobilization of a local coalition of school staff, health and human service providers, and community members known as the **Northwest Corner Prevention Network**. The effort is led by the **McCall Center for Behavioral Health**.

The project is called the **Northwest Corner Prevention Coalition: A Collaborative Approach to Address Youth Substance Abuse in the Northwest Corner**, and it was formed in response to some staggering facts surrounding the growing opioid epidemic:

- Drug overdose is the **number one cause of accidental death** in America.
- In Connecticut, the state's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner reported a **39 percent increase in accidental drug-related deaths** between 2012 (357 deaths) and 2016 (917 deaths).
- In the rural Northwest Corner, the **drug overdose rate per 10,000 in population has increased dramatically** in Salisbury (0 in 2012 to 5.37 in 2015) and in Sharon (0 in 2012 to 7.22 in 2015).

The coalition aims to delay the first use of marijuana and alcohol among students and communicate to children and parents alike that off-label use of prescription medications (such as opioid painkillers), alcohol and marijuana is harmful. This important information is shared with Northwest Corner students as part of the **Botvin LifeSkills Program**.

## SPOTLIGHT: BOTVIN LIFESKILLS PROGRAM IN REGION ONE SCHOOLS



Botvin LifeSkills classes have been implemented in the Region One School District to provide students in grades six through eight with the confidence and knowledge to handle difficult situations.

*"When I look at the efforts, this is the answer. It's very hopeful. If we're able to equip kids with these coping skills and build connections, that's going to be the solution. Prevention is the best investment that I can think of that can turn the tide."*

*Maria Coutant Skinner, executive director of the McCall Center for Behavioral Health*

*"The response from the children has been so positive. They look forward to it actually. Some of the seventh- and eighth-grade students have even told me it's their favorite program."*

*Leila Wood, school counselor at North Canaan Elementary School, on the Botvin LifeSkills Program*

The curriculum outlines the dangers of tobacco, drugs and alcohol, and instructors give tips on how to deal with peer pressure, anger, anxiety and more to target the social and psychological factors that initiate risky behaviors.

To date, **149 Region One students** have participated in the class. As the program enters its third year, participation rates are projected to increase to **at least 200 students**.

Botvin LifeSkills has been proven to reduce drug use by up to **75 percent**, alcohol use by up to **60 percent** and verbal and physical aggression, fighting and delinquency by up to **50 percent**.

While the program will need at least three additional years of implementation before results are known, an early success for the initiative has been the enthusiasm demonstrated from students and school personnel in the Region One School District, as seen in [this video](#).

## SHARING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES WITH THE COMMUNITY



The coalition recently completed the second year of its five-year plan, and the dedicated volunteers of the **Northwest Corner Prevention Network** have hosted multiple community events and recruited new members from multiple sectors to help prevent substance misuse.

- Twelve **NCPN meetings** were held throughout the year with an attendance of **120 participants**. Two meetings were held in each of the six Region One towns to facilitate community input and increase awareness.
- NCPN sponsored a **5K road race** and reached **75 community members** by disseminating educational materials at a staffed information table.
- **Motivational speaker** Dr. Matt Bellace presented “Natural Highs” for all Region One students and the community. Bellace used his background in psychology and comedy to share a positive, science-based and entertaining approach to substance abuse prevention.

*“I like how we talk about things that are happening in real life today and how much you can get into it and talk about what’s happening in your life. We’ve learned about peer pressure, vaping and how bad it is, smoking and how commercials target young kids like us.”*

*Spencer, sixth grade Region One student, on the Botvin LifeSkills Program*

*“I think the kids responded very positively to being able to talk about those topics in an environment that felt positive and safe. I really liked how the program was very interactive. We had videos, we had activities, we had students up and moving around.”*

*Monica Rodriguez, home/school liaison at Kent Center School, on the Botvin LifeSkills Program*



- **Red Ribbon Week** reached **1,088 youth and families** through classroom education and flyer dissemination.
- A partnership was established with HEARST Media Advertising to conduct a **youth-targeted media campaign** in Region One.
- A free **Narcan training class** at Kent Town Hall taught attendees how to save a life in the event of an opioid overdose.
- The second annual **Wellness Fair** featured information from all areas of the wellness field at Housatonic Valley Regional High School.
- A community **opioid panel discussion** was held at Housatonic Valley Regional High School. The panelists were *John Simoncelli*, executive director of Greenwoods Counseling Referrals; *Julia H. Scharnberg*, grants and program director at Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation; *Maria Coutant Skinner*, executive director of the McCall Center for Behavioral Health; and *Brian Ohler*, State Representative 64th General Assembly District.
- Two **Drug Take Back events** in 2017 allowed attendees to safely dispose of more than **280 pounds of unused medications**. A third event was held at Kent Town Hall and Troop B in North Canaan in April 2018.
- NCPN invited John Morello to perform “Dirt,” a **presentation on drugs, bullying and choices**, at Housatonic Valley Regional High School.

*“The Botvin training has touched upon a lot of the really important topics [the students are] going to face in high school and beyond.”*

*Alicia Simonetti-Shpur, school counselor at Cornwall Consolidated School, on the Botvin LifeSkills Program*

Berkshire  
Taconic  
Community  
Foundation

30 YEARS

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The **Northwest Corner Prevention Coalition: A Collaborative Approach to Address Youth Substance Abuse in the Northwest Corner** has entered its third year. It will focus on an ambitious work plan that continues to utilize evidence-based prevention strategies, builds capacity and sustainability, and reassesses its strategic plan to reflect new data — all with the goal of delaying the first use of marijuana and alcohol among students.



FOUNDATION  
— for —  
COMMUNITY  
HEALTH