



Date: July 23, 2008

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Plan addresses \$5.93 billion cost of untreated substance abuse

Oregonians across the state are calling for expanded addiction prevention, treatment and recovery services because they say untreated drug and alcohol abuse is costing the state an estimated \$5.93 billion a year.

This represents four percent of the 2006 gross state product, or \$1,600 per person, according to the just-released 2008 "Oregon Speaks: Community Addiction Services Investment Strategy."

ECONorthwest researchers said substance abuse cuts a costly swath in Oregon each year, including \$813 million for health care, \$4.15 billion in lost earnings, and \$967 million for law enforcement, criminal justice, social welfare and other expenditures.

The 30-page strategy plan is available on the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) Web site at www.oregon.gov/DHS/addiction/docs/addictions-strategic-plan.pdf.

"More than 150 people across Oregon shared their top priorities for battling Oregon's substance abuse issues, and that's a key element of this strategy report," said Karen Wheeler, addictions policy administrator, DHS Addictions and Mental Health Division.

Human cost of substance abuse

Wheeler, a member of the strategy group steering committee, said the human toll from substance abuse is alarming.

"An estimated 258,000 Oregonians suffer from substance abuse or dependence issues, but only 60,000 people use publicly funded treatment programs each year,"

she said. “That means we need greater capacity for prevention, treatment and recovery services, and we need to get more people with substance abuse issues into treatment.”

In the strategy report, community members recommended that investments should be targeted to these priority areas:

- Underage drinking;
- Adolescent treatment;
- Increased access to treatment;
- Prevention collaboration with the Oregon Department of Education;
- Programs to address the effect of substance abuse on the workplace;
- Workforce development; and
- Recovery supports such as housing and wraparound services.

The report recommends that new treatment funds go for outpatient services for uninsured workers and culturally specific treatment. It calls for an increase in certain fees to stabilize the system. Recovery investments would be used to help more Oregonians transition into a recovery lifestyle and maintain long-term recovery.

Prevention dollars would be aimed at a variety of evidence-based family and school programs, and strategies that emphasize health and wellness.

Investment strategy participants

Legislators, stakeholders, youth, business leaders, family members, people in recovery, community service providers and focus groups met in Pendleton, Bend, Coos Bay, Roseburg and Portland last fall to work on the investment strategy.

The sessions were sponsored by the DHS Addictions and Mental Health Division, Governor’s Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs, Association of Oregon Community Mental Health Programs, and the Oregon Prevention, Education and Recovery Association.

“This treatment strategy report represents the most comprehensive look ever into Oregon’s need for addiction services,” said Bob Nikkel, DHS assistant director for addictions and mental health. “As we increase recovery care services, we expect to see more people sustaining long-term recovery from addictive diseases, less crime, a more effective workforce and more stable families with fewer children taken into foster care because of parental addiction.”

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