

## **Meetings Showcase Darien's Health Problems, Including Opioids, Alcohol, Stress, Mental Health**

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Darien's youth, not worried about having sex, are getting sexually transmitted diseases at the fastest rate in memory, making STD's the town's largest reported health problem. Meanwhile, the fastest growing public health problem in Darien is opioid use.

Those were some of the findings from a health assessment Darien officials recently conducted in town and presented as part of a three-part series of public forums on health problems Darien residents should be watching out for.

Opioid use was discussed on each of the past three Thursdays at the meetings in Darien Library, along with

substance abuse in general, stress and other health problems that might be prevented if individual town residents take them seriously enough before the problems get too big.

"Our health challenges are real, and many of us have been touched by what we're here to discuss this evening," First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said at the first meeting. "These aren't someone else's problems, and we have to own them so we can overcome them together."

For the recent health assessment, town officials looked at data from hospitals, ambulance reports, state information on reported health conditions and other data to see where the town might concentrate its efforts in keeping the population healthy, Darien Health Director David Knauf said. The assessment was compared with a similar health assessment conducted 10 years ago, in 2007.

"This isn't just about medical care — this is a widespread review of the community in its entirety," he said. "Public health is really about keeping people from needing to go to doctors. It's all about being proactive, of creating policies and procedures, about just creating an environment of good public health for residents. [...] Our responsibility is to keep track of what it is that's making people in the community sick."

Substance abuse, Knauf said is "our biggest concern going forward. [...] "There's one thing that wasn't on our radar screen in 2007, and that's the opioid crisis, and that's what we're seeing right now. It wasn't there 10 years ago."

#### **Demographics: Darien's High Proportion of Kids & Parents**

Unlike Connecticut as a whole, where the population is expected to decline in the next 10 years, Darien's population seems to be growing, "so we have to do some planning and thinking about that," Knauf said. "There's going to be some impacts associated with that."

School enrollment increased by 300 students in the past 10 years, he said. A total of 32 percent of the town's population is under 18 (with 21 percent of the population enrolled in schools — the rest, presumably, is too young for school). That 32 percent compares with 21 percent for Connecticut as a whole.

The town does have fewer seniors, with 12 percent of the population over 65 years old, but they can account for a large number of the total EMS ambulance calls, Knauf said. "Twenty percent of Post 53 calls are for people who have fallen," he said.

[A weeks-long workshop for senior citizens on preventing and dealing with falls is about to start on Tuesday at Darien Senior Activities Center — anyone who wants to register for the free class needs to do so beforehand.]

#### **Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are also a growing problem, Knauf said: "We never had numbers that high."

In fact, taken together they amounted to the "No. 1 reportable disease in Darien last year," Knauf said.

Part of the reason for that is that not all flu cases are reported, Darien Health Department Medical Advisor Dr. Caleb Moore pointed out, and Knauf said that 2016 was a relatively quiet year for the flu. Influenza and Lyme disease tend to be underreported by doctors, he said.

Those who contracted STDs were "college-age kids, primarily," he said. One statistic collected in a survey of high school students for the Thriving Youth Initiative showed 13 percent of high school seniors "didn't think it's a big deal — they're not worried about having sex," Knauf said. "With that kind of attitude, and going off to college [...] I can tell you, most of the reported cases are 20, 24 [year-olds]."

"STDs have certainly been on the rise [in the United States]," Knauf said. "There's been a lot of commentary and conversations as to why that may be the case," he said. Dating apps may be one reason, also "a change in sexual mores due to the culture nowadays. I don't think we really have an answer to that quite yet."

Dr. Caleb Moore, who works with Darien Health Department, pointed out that "We now do urine tests rather than swabs, so people are more likely to come in and be tested (for STDs). It's easier to test, less invasive — so people are, therefore, I think, more willing to do it."

#### **Opioids**

The number of cases of ingestions and poisoning is way up, and a large part of the reason seems to be increasing illicit use of opioids, Knauf said. The numbers of those cases are "not really in the top 10 reasons why the EMS [ambulances] are being called out, but it's the fastest increasing reason why the EMSs are being called out," he said. That's probably the case in most other places, he added.

In 2010 "there were five ingestion-related calls, and none were related to opioids. In 2016, there were 18 calls for ingestions related to opioids," he said. "So we have issues."

The three presentations on Darien's health had several speakers talking about opioids and other substance abuse problems, including binge drinking. Carrie Bernier, executive director of the Community Fund of Darien presented data about alcohol and drug use gathered in surveys for the Thriving Youth Initiative, which is backed by a coalition of groups in town, led by the Community Fund.

#### **Mental Health Problems Growing**

"We're seeing a tremendous increase in mental health calls — issues associated with psychiatric problems or suicidal patients," Knauf continued. "So we're seeing evidence of high levels of stress affecting the health of our population." [...]

"Between 2014 and 2016, calls for suicidal patients have doubled, and those for ingestion poisoning have more than tripled."

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"So we're seeing a trend, we can't deny it," he said. "It's here. [...] We're going to have to plan and take action."

#### **Population Density Affects Stress, But Also Traffic Injuries**

The population density of Darien "is equivalent to that in a city, because we're pretty well fully developed," Knauf said. And the fact that Darien is a very densely packed community also has an effect on health, he said. Darien is much more densely packed than, for instance, New Canaan, he said, and much more so than Connecticut as a whole.

When population density is high, people tend to have more stress. "It manifests itself with traffic jams, road rage and all kinds of other issues," he said. "It can be noise pollution when people get on each other's nerves [...] light pollution, traffic congestion [...]"

One good thing about having so much traffic congestion is that when people do get injured in motor vehicle accidents, the injuries tend to be less severe because speeds aren't as high.

#### **What's Next**

The Health Department expects to release the full Darien Health Assessment report soon, and hold informational presentations and workshops to give people advice with coping and preventing health problems, Knauf said.

[How Healthy Are We - Part 1 1-12-17](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).