

Drug Exposed Children-A Problem for Rural Iowa

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Providers of services to women and children in Iowa are acutely aware that we have a serious drug problem in our state. Often forgotten victims of the drug problem are the children affected by their parents or caretakers drug use. In 2002 DHS reported that 468 children were abused because their parents manufactured methamphetamine in their presence. Another 397 children were reported to be adversely affected by their parents' use of illicit drugs-often involving prenatal use of methamphetamine. A study done by DHS in 2003 found that at one point, meth use was a factor in approximately one third of the child abuse cases in Southwest Iowa. Recently a significant number of children have been recognized to be exposed postnatally to drugs through their parents or caretakers use and/or manufacture of drugs in their presence.

Southeast Iowa is no exception to this problem. As a result of community concern regarding the appropriate care of infants and children exposed to drugs and their mothers/parents, the Community Task Force for Drug Exposed Children was created in July of 1998. The Task Force, which represents providers from Ottumwa and the surrounding area, has been meeting regularly since that time.

The mission of the Task Force is to (1) ensure that every child is born free of illegal drugs and remains in a drug-free environment and (2) to implement effective and appropriate treatment programs for children and families in the event of exposure to illegal drugs.

The Task Force has representation from a broad base of individuals from the community representing health, human services, substance abuse treatment, mental health, law enforcement, county attorney, and private citizens. A unique aspect of the group is the participation of members of the Moms Off Meth support group. Their input to this group has been extremely helpful as we have addressed the needs of mothers and children.

The Task Force identified a number of issues.

1. Recognition that substance use and abuse during pregnancy leads to increased risk for prenatal complications, prematurity, infant death and morbidity, and altered behavioral patterns in children, including neurological, growth and developmental delay.
2. Lack of universal screening of pregnant women and infants to detect the incidence of drug exposure in order to document the extent of the problem in our community.
3. Lack of knowledge and skills among social workers, health, education, mental health and criminal justice professionals needed to address the unique psychosocial, cultural, and medical/health needs of children and families affected by drug addiction.
4. Lack of adequate treatment interventions for drug addiction and exposure, especially gender specific treatment.
5. A fragmented and uncoordinated system of care among community agencies and service providers for substance abusing women who are pregnant and or parenting.
6. Lack of long-term treatment, follow up and community support for drug-exposed children and their mothers/parents.

7. Lack of adequate funding of programs providing services to these children and their families.

In response to these identified needs and as a result of collaborative efforts of the members of the Task Force, a number of initiatives have taken place.

1. The Task Force meets monthly to discuss progress toward goals and to identify new problems and/or unmet needs.
2. A contract has been developed by DHS for use with families when a baby screens positive for drugs.
3. The Moms Off Meth support group for mothers developed as a result of needs identified by the Task Force.
4. A survey has been done of Wapello County DHS social workers in 1999 and 2000 regarding the impact of drug use on their caseloads.
5. A brochure directed to pregnant women has been developed by members of the Task Force in collaboration with the Mom's Off Meth support group.
6. The Task Force has worked with the Wapello County Attorney's office regarding recommendations to the court in cases where court intervention occurs.
7. Members of the Task Force are in the process of determining-again with input from the MOM's Off Meth group-the most appropriate services and most appropriate timing of services to mothers and children.
8. Caretakers of infants exposed to drugs in utero are referred for training in Infant Massage.
9. Community meetings have been held with area legislators, staff of our federal legislators, and state representatives from the DHS and IDPH regarding our issues and recommendations for interventions.
10. Members of the Task Force presented testimony to the Human Resources Committee of the Iowa House of Representatives.
11. The Task force has sponsored a community training regarding the effects of drug use on families in 2002. The training was attended by more than 200 individuals. Another community training was held on April 15th of 2004. A third community training is planned for March of 2005.

Since the Task Force began we have identified a number of problems and issues in delivering services to women and children affected by drug use. Through the collaborative efforts of community members we have made what we feel is significant progress in providing services to these women and children. However, much remains to be done before we reach our goal of ensuring children are born drug free, or if exposed to drugs before birth receive needed treatment. We will continue to work together as a community to ensure our goal is met.