GAO

Testimony

‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖‖

143903

Promising Community Drug Abuse

Prevention Programs

Statement of Robert York
Acting Director
Program Evaluation in Human Services Areas
Program Evaluation and Methodology
  Division

Before the
Subcommittee on Select Education
United States House of Representatives

OS13386 /142903

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to respond to your invitation to testify about the work we have done related to drug abuse prevention. At your request, we examined comprehensive community-based programs for young adolescents, and we evaluated the methods used in two federal agency efforts to recognize exemplary programs. While our work in these areas is not fully complete, we expect to publish our reports shortly, and I can present our main conclusions and recommendations today.

In brief, we found six features of promising community drug abuse prevention programs for young people that we believe deserve wider trial and evaluation by others. What appeared most important was not _what_ services were delivered, but rather _how_ (that is, in what context) they were delivered. We suggest that a set-aside of funds specifically for evaluation could allow programs to learn about successes without sacrificing services.

We also reviewed the 1989-90 cycles of the Department of Education's Drug-Free School Recognition Program and the Department of Health and Human Services' Exemplary Program Study. Although both efforts are intended to provide federal recognition to outstanding local drug abuse prevention programs, we found that both recognition efforts exclude many programs from consideration. More fundamentally, we concluded that the public cannot rely on the

recognition awards as confirmation that a program works since applicants were not required to provide evidence of effectiveness.

I will turn first to our review of community programs.

COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Prevention of drug use by young adolescents is one critical first step in attacking the nation's drug abuse problem. You asked us to examine successful community efforts to develop comprehensive programs in drug abuse prevention and education for adolescents. Our objective was to describe such efforts and locate important features that others should consider when designing or revising programs for their communities. We hoped to support our conclusions with evidence suggesting that certain features are associated with greater program success; however, programs were able to supply little data about their outcomes. Therefore, our work focused on promising, rather than successful, programs--those that at least appeared to be well-designed and that experts believed showed early signs of potential success.

It is widely believed that experimentation with tobacco, alcohol, and drugs usually begins in the early adolescent years (that is, from ages 10 to 15). Primary prevention efforts (those that are designed to prevent drug use before experimentation begins) therefore must begin by this time. Accordingly, our study

2

focused on both urban and rural programs working with youths aged 10 to 13. Comprehensive approaches may use a number of community agencies to provide services. They may also address multiple domains of youths' lives, such as those of the individual, the family, the peer group, school, and community.

We identified 16 sources of exemplary or promising comprehensive drug abuse prevention programs that yielded a variety of programs serving very different groups of young people. Through a survey mailed to 226 promising programs, we obtained further data about basic aspects of 138 programs (a 68-percent response rate) serving over 500,000 participants--including target population, numbers served, costs, planning, staffing, community relations, program operations, goals and objectives, extent of services, services offered, barriers, evaluation data collected, and evaluation results. Most important, we studied 10 of the most promising programs on-site, where we observed program activities and interviewed nearly 125 participants and 150 staff and community representatives. Because we were unable to obtain evidence of success, we can speak to program promise only; nevertheless, these programs had very encouraging participation rates. (For example, 70 percent of the survey respondents reported that almost all of their participants completed the program.)

I would like to recognize the assistance and cooperation we received from the programs we visited. We are extremely grateful

for the cooperation we received during our visits, especially in view of the extensive nature of our interest in programs that were outside the sphere of federal law, regulations, or funding.

Having said this, let me move to a more detailed discussion of our findings to date.

Features That Characterized the
Strongest Programs We Saw

In selecting our method for deciding what was important in programs' design, we quickly learned that we could not rely on the best way--that is, using the results of evaluations to indicate which features were associated with greater program success--since programs were unable to supply much data on their outcomes. We did, however, see large differences in the enthusiasm and attachment the young participants showed towards the programs. For example, youths described their efforts to recruit friends into the program, expressed their desire to participate in the programs more frequently, and told us that they felt that they belonged to the group. We used these emotions as a rough index of promise, since programs are unlikely to be successful without them.

We identified six features that were present in programs associated with high degrees of participant enthusiasm and attachment; at least one of these features was absent in programs

4

that evoked lower degrees of enthusiasm and attachment. We do not suggest that these features are causal factors, nor are they an exhaustive list of necessary elements; they are simply a framework of key ideas that seem to be important and thus deserve further trial and study.

The most promising programs had in common a particular underlying approach and six important features. The approach was positive, stressing the learning of skills, motivational techniques, and coping tactics necessary for dealing with the multiple problems in participants' lives (as opposed to the somewhat negative approach of combating drug use alone). The six features were

    --   a comprehensive strategy;

    --   an indirect approach towards drug abuse;

    --   an approach aimed at empowering youth, with the stress on developing competency skills;

    --   participatory activities;

    --   a culturally sensitive approach; and

    --   highly structured activities.

Comprehensive Approaches

First, we found that most programs we visited defined comprehensiveness in terms of their approach to at-risk young people. That is, programs attempted to help their young participants deal with multiple needs--including the need to succeed in school, stay healthy, and cope with troubled family situations--rather than simply concentrating on drug abuse prevention. Of the 5 possible dimensions of youths' lives--the individual, family, peers, school, and community--all 10 of the programs we studied covered at least 2, and 2 programs provided services in all 5 areas. The average across the 10 programs was in excess of 3 service areas per program, illustrating the extent to which these programs emphasized the comprehensive approach.

At one program, we observed the integrated co-location of over 30 services offered by a range of staff, including doctors, teachers, coaches, artists, and many others within the program's one building. These services included medical care, counseling, infant care and nutrition services, and physical and creative arts. Because youths have difficulty following through on referrals, the program is designed to make access to services easy and to provide opportunities to deal with many different problems without the youths having to retell their stories to a multitude of professionals.

Indirect Approach to

Drug Abuse Prevention

Second, most programs we visited used an indirect or "back door" approach by embedding drug abuse prevention in the context of activities, rather than addressing it directly. Many programs did not emphasize to youths that the programs they were participating in were designed to prevent drug use. Rather, the programs were presented as much more general recreational and skill-building opportunities.

Youths were attracted to the programs by activities involving their cultural heritages, sports, or art, or by free meals or snacks. The programs we visited operated in places with very few opportunities for youths. Program directors said that general youth services and sports such as those offered by their programs were not commonly available in settings that were safe, clean, and free of illegal drug activity.

Drug abuse   prevention discussions were often directly related to or intertwined with program activities, rather than simply being offered as additional components to the program. In these instances, youths were not confronted with prevention topics; rather, the topics were introduced as natural outgrowths of the activities as much as possible. In this way, activities which began as enjoyable diversions could naturally incorporate lessons

in prevention. For example, we were told that at one program

theatrical performances about street life often started out as

"just plays" but became more personal explorations as the youths

conducted background research (for example, research on runaways or

drug abuse issues), thereby raising numerous issues that the staff

then discussed with the youths. Within the relevant and practical

context of gaining the insight needed for effective acting and play

production, youths were more willing to participate in such

discussions.

Further, the programs did not explicitly advertise themselves

as offering drug abuse prevention services. Eight of the 10

programs we visited and more than 50 percent of the survey

respondents developed creative program names that omitted any

reference to drug abuse or prevention services, which reflected a

critical overall philosophy they ascribed to. Program staff told

us that it was important to avoid further stigmatization of youth,

which could result from the more overt labeling of programs, and

that parents and youths may only seek assistance from those

programs that avoid such explicit labeling.

Empowerment Approaches

Third, the programs adopted a positive approach towards young

people, endeavoring to teach them coping and other skills, rather

than a problem or deficit orientation. The ultimate objective of

8

many of the programs we visited was not limited to drug abuse prevention, but aimed broadly at empowering youths with the range of skills necessary to make positive, constructive, and healthful choices. These programs attempted to provide experiential learning by creating an environment where youths could experiment actively with roles and ways of interacting with others that they had previously had little opportunity to experience. Three main strategies employed by these programs to empower youths with these needed skills were (1) role modeling, (2) leadership training, and (3) general skills development.

Many programs make use of role models or mentors to help empower youth by developing trust and reinforcing positive behaviors. Many of the participants in these programs came from families where parents--often a single parent--could not consistently provide adequate care. Program staff stressed to us the importance of finding local role models or mentors for youths. These had to be responsible adults to whom the youths could become attached and who could then attend to the youths' specific needs. They contrasted this approach with one that uses professional athletes, actors, or other celebrities as role models, pointing out that very few youths will ever have the skill and luck to emulate them. These programs believed that local community members could wield much more influence in a youth's life over the long run.

Leadership training components typically involved participants applying their newly acquired skills to a community project. In one program, the task was to assess the needs of the community and develop a program that would effectively communicate the drug-free message to its neighborhoods. The community projects included, among others, recording public service announcements, making a presentation to younger children, and hosting a carnival whose theme was an antidrug message.

Participatory Approaches

Fourth, in most parts of the programs we visited, youths were active participants, often engaging in goal or product-oriented activities (creative arts, sports, and so on) rather than passive learning (classroom lectures or group discussions). For example, programs did not lecture about self-esteem; rather, they provided games and exercises carefully planned to offer success to many participants, which could in turn improve self-esteem. In teaching the skills necessary to resist offers to use or sell drugs, leaders gave youths many opportunities to role-play their new skills. (Research suggests that people are unlikely to develop and then correctly and consistently use resistance skills unless they actually practice them.)

Some programs carried this concept one step further and created participatory activities that were goal or product-

oriented. Goal-oriented activities serve to develop opportunities for achievement, thought to be important for positive adolescent development. We heard of a very wide range of such activities, both of an individual and group nature, including creative arts performances, athletic tournaments, problem-solving games, neighborhood parades, clean-ups, and services to other needy groups.

In one program, youths were challenged with games designed so that group members needed to cooperate in order to successfully complete the tasks. In one game we observed, the necessary planning and coordination proved to be, at times, frustrating and difficult for the group. Arguments broke out periodically and had to be resolved by momentarily suspending the activity and resolving the conflict through discussion. This participatory activity provided ample opportunities for program staff to observe positive and negative relationships, decision making, and interaction behaviors. In addition, staff indicated that once youths succeeded at activities they never previously thought they could succeed at, their self-esteem increased. Staff also believed that, through this group process, youths learned how to resolve conflict and work with others.

Culturally Sensitive Approaches

Fifth, many program staff reported to us that, in order to teach youths self-respect, it was important to have a culturally specific approach that allowed youths to take pride in their cultural heritage. We saw this cultural specificity in both program staffing and activities. We commonly observed that staff were culturally similar to the youths in the programs we visited.

Many programs attempted to match the ethnicity of their staffs with that of their participants. However, cultural sensitivity can be assured or enhanced in ways other than by matching staff and client ethnicity. For example, a state-agency-sponsored program serving a housing project population found that they had difficulty recruiting participants because of the traditionally poor relationship between the residents and state agencies. The program then undertook concentrated efforts to recruit a few of the residents to serve as peer leaders. These leaders in turn were more successful at recruiting other participants from their housing project than the agency staff had been.

We learned of a wide range of program activities based on the appropriate culture of participants, including American Indian powwows, African dances, Puerto Rican music, and so on. The staff in one program explained their belief that, when people have a strong sense of self developed through cultural identity, they are

12

less likely to resort to solutions like drug use to make themselves feel good.

Structured Approaches

Sixth, many program staff thought that structure and discipline were very important and consequently emphasized them in every possible way in program design and in working with individual youths, in order to provide a dependability and consistency that may otherwise have been lacking for the youths. Further, youths told us that they liked the structure and discipline in those programs that featured them. At one program, for example, structure was created by well-planned and highly supervised activities that all the youths were required to participate in.

At more than one program, staff structured activities by making all the information needed for participation very clear (for example, activity content and rules, as well as meeting places and times). Staff at these programs also maintained discipline both through predetermined program rules and by actively supervising all the youths to ensure that rules were being followed. In some programs, the youth participants reinforced rules so that staff did not need to intervene. The regular and predictable activity schedule also enabled participants to count on the program activities.

One program emphasized the importance of discipline and rewarded it formally. Activities were structured to reward youths who attended program activities consistently. Youths who played basketball accumulated points for attending each practice as well as for winning games. These points could then be used in competing for awards at the end of the year. Through this system, a moderately-talented youth who consistently attended each practice had as much (or more) chance to win the award as did the star who helped the team win several games but then disappointed teammates by failing to show up for others.

Program Implementation

Most programs we visited were broad-aim efforts working with very needy young people in very poor environments of the inner city and rural areas, from Puerto Rico to New Mexico to the boroughs of New York City. Not surprisingly, in addition to issues of basic design, they faced challenges of implementation. The programs shared common struggles in the following six areas:

-- maintaining continuity with the participants,

-- coordinating and integrating the service components,

-- providing accessible services,

-- obtaining funds,

-- attracting necessary leadership and staff, and

-- conducting evaluation.

I would like to highlight one area where the government could provide assistance--program evaluation.

We would like to be able to report that we had identified community-based drug abuse prevention programs that were documented as successful. Instead of hard evidence, however, we have had to rely on expert nomination and a variety of inferential data. The danger here is subjectivity; what is needed is comparative and longitudinal data and analysis to identify successful programs and demonstrate what characteristics or components of community-based drug abuse prevention programs are effective.

Evaluation of social programs is often an evolutionary process, beginning with some descriptive information on program participants and other aspects of the program process, developing into more formal assessments of the outcomes or impacts of the program on the participants, and maturing into a formal outcome or effectiveness evaluation. An outcome evaluation consists of a

15

carefully designed study that provides data on outcomes for participants in a program--such as lower rates of drug use, increased levels of education or employment, and the like--and the same data for similar persons who were not participants. Such an outcome or effectiveness evaluation thus provides evidence on what changed as a result of the program. Positive results from an outcome evaluation--showing more favorable results for participants than for similar nonparticipants--offer hard, objective evidence that a social program truly makes a difference and is thus a productive investment in human capital.

We found in our survey that many programs were in the first two stages of evaluation. Most (over 90 percent) were collecting data, but many (42 percent) had not yet analyzed their data. Only 3 percent had any completed evaluations. Over half of the programs were more than 4 years old, which was enough time for them to have completed at least some evaluation. In our site visits, we found outcome data being collected, including school grades, reports of drug use, knowledge concerning drugs, and self-esteem. However, only one of the 10 programs we visited had collected data from a comparison group, which is the fundamental requirement of an outcome evaluation.

Some programs expressed an interest in evaluation but were reluctant to divert scarce program resources. The Congress could provide additional funds to create a separate set-aside for

16

evaluation under both the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act. For programs receiving federal funds, this would prevent the reduction of services to needy youth while increasing our knowledge concerning effective approaches.

Organizing an evaluation is also a challenge. This is a specialized skill, and those who can operate effective programs may not be competent to design and conduct effective program evaluations. The Department of Education is completing a guide for evaluating drug education programs intended to aid grantees under the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. We urge the Secretary of Education to complete this handbook and disseminate it widely as soon as possible.

Now let me turn to our work on federal programs that provide recognition to exemplary drug abuse prevention efforts.

FEDERAL RECOGNITION PROGRAMS

In an attempt to focus national attention on exemplary efforts and provide successful models for others to emulate, the Departments of Education and of Health and Human Services (HHS)-- the latter through its Office for Substance Abuse Prevention-- established systematic efforts to recognize exemplary drug abuse prevention programs in 1987. The Department of Education is Drug-Free School Recognition Program targeted school programs for youth

(at a cost of $961,000 for the 1989-90 cycle); the Office for
Substance Abuse Prevention's Exemplary Program Study reviewed
programs for any age group (at a cost of $36,599 for the 1989-90
cycle). Both agencies solicited nominations through state agencies
and private organizations, required written applications, and used
nonfederal reviewers to evaluate the applications on specified sets
of criteria. The Department of Education's methodology also
included site visits to programs initially rated highly. Federal
officials in each case made the final recognition decisions.

Awarding federal recognition on a sound basis is both
important and difficult. A great many public and private agencies
can benefit from good information on what works in the perplexing
area of drug abuse prevention. Experts in the field and federal
agency officials may have notions about what works best and
preferences in favor of various theoretical and practical aspects
of such programs; however, sound solutions to the nation's drug
abuse problem will come faster when evaluation of effectiveness
becomes the main test for action, funding, and recognition. A
recognition effort based on reliable evaluation of the objectives
and results of promising models can give publicity to program
designs based on evidence rather than guesswork, and can thus
suggest the usefulness at all levels of strong program evaluation.
Iterative evaluations that are done as parts of recognition efforts
can show unreasonable objectives that proved unattainable, as well

as program approaches that are unsuccessful; both can then be discarded and funds reallocated.

Views vary on how to design drug abuse prevention programs, and there is as yet no conclusive evidence to settle the debate. Accordingly, designing a recognition effort is challenging, and many approaches are plausible and within the sponsoring agencies' discretion. Public confidence in the results of these recognition programs will be stronger to the extent that their underlying policies are sound and their appraisal procedures include a wide search for nominees, clear evaluation criteria, valid data on which to base the evaluation of each program, reviewers with the range of skills necessary to evaluate applications, and sound decision procedures.

To carry out our study of the two recognition efforts, we reviewed their procedures in detail. We obtained written documentation; observed review panel meetings; interviewed officials, reviewers, and applicants; and examined selected cases of successful and unsuccessful applications in order to assess the degree to which both recognition efforts included these characteristics and to reach conclusions on the likelihood of two kinds of errors: (1) the overlooking of good programs and (2) the recognition of weaker ones. We also examined the research and evaluation literature to see if any approaches were consistently effective or ineffective.

Underlying Policies Limit Examination
of Program Approaches

We found that the underlying policies of the recognition efforts plausibly but perhaps unnecessarily limited the search for successful programs. That is, both recognition efforts (within their discretion to set limits on their searches) had made decisions to include only those programs with a no-use approach to drug abuse prevention, with the Department of Education applying a more stringent definition of no-use than did the Office for Substance Abuse Prevention. (In the strictest sense, no-use programs stress a consistent message that any drug use is wrong and harmful.)

In our review of the research, we found no conclusive research favoring the no-use approach or its alternative, responsible-use. The responsible-use approach does <u>not</u> condone the use of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. While attempting to prevent or delay the onset of drug use, this approach may stress informed decision making or aim to reduce the riskiest forms of use, such as drinking and driving, for those <u>who are already involved</u> in tobacco, alcohol, and drug use.

The constraint in the recognition efforts against including responsible-use programs could result in the exclusion of some set

of programs that are effective. We recognize that alcohol use is illegal for minors and that drug use is illegal for all. However, an argument can be made in favor of casting a wider net for recognition programs--to include responsible-use approaches to tobacco or alcohol use by adults and youths over the age of 15--in view of the fact that research findings thus far have not demonstrated the superiority of either the responsible-use or no-use approach.

In another example of narrowing the field of eligible activity, we found that the Department of Education stressed a set of prevention strategies in the application materials (such as resistance-skills training, self-esteem enhancement, and in-school curricula in general) that, while among those with promise, are not the only strategies that are supported in the literature. (Others include, for example, peer programs and alternatives programs.) Until evaluation has shown that one strategy is clearly superior to another, it seems that the long-range objective of finding ways to reduce drug use will be better served--and sooner achieved--by allowing the possibility of recognizing a wider range of approaches to drug abuse prevention.

Recognition Evaluation Process
Needs Improvement in Five Areas

We found several procedural weaknesses in the methods each recognition effort used to assess programs that applied for recognition.

Nominations

Programs could only be nominated for recognition by specific state agencies or designated organizations. And, although these served a useful role in voluntarily shouldering the screening tasks, this procedure was neither systematic nor comprehensive. For example, under this procedure, some programs that might be important potential models but that (1) were not well-known to a designated nominator, (2) were not funded by a nominator, or (3) did not have other connections to a nominator might never be given the opportunity to enter the process and be recognized or emulated.

Criteria

The dimensions on which applications were appraised had not been clearly defined, and we observed instances of multiple interpretations of the same evidence and of different weights having been given to the same dimension.

Data

Most importantly, we found that the current recognition
processes did not determine whether the recognized programs worked.
Applications demanded only that programs discuss how they
conducted any evaluation; results were not specifically requested,
and we saw few that had been provided. Thus, applicants were not
required to provide data that demonstrated the effectiveness of
their programs, despite the fact that the eligibility criteria
stated that programs must have done so. Commenting on a draft of
our report, HHS stated that most of the applicant programs were not
designed as research projects and therefore should not be expected
to have conducted much evaluation. A great many programs may have
plausible designs and elements that show promise of achieving
reductions in drug use; however, where demonstration of
effectiveness is a criterion for eligibility, it is not clear why
national recognition should be awarded on the basis of promise
alone. The feasibility of requiring evidence of effectiveness is
demonstrated by the long-standing practice of another recognition
method, the Program Effectiveness Panel of the Department of
Education. This panel does not restrict programs with regard to
the kinds of evaluations they undertake, the outcome variables that
are assessed, or the strength of effectiveness that must be
demonstrated. The breadth and flexibility of this evaluation

23

approach seem especially warranted in the assessment of drug abuse prevention programs.

The HHS Exemplary Program Study, in particular, did not fully use the data it had available and lacked key corroborating evidence. Individual review panelists were not able to read applications for which they were not the primary reviewers, before discussing them. This meant that no matter how detailed and valid the evidence presented by programs might have been, it was not accorded full consideration by those responsible for making decisions about recognition.

A strength of the Department of Education procedures was that multiple data sources were used, with site visits conducted to verify the information presented in the applications. The Exemplary Program Study did not conduct site visits. The budget for the Exemplary Program Study was 4 percent of that for the Drug-Free School Recognition Program, and therefore was not sufficient to allow for site visits. From our review of Drug-Free School Recognition Program panelists' scores before and after the site visits, however, we concluded that visits were very important. The visits appeared to be useful in determining the extent to which programs were actually implemented, as well as the extent to which they met the application standards. Without the strongest data possible on which to base their recognition decisions, and without adequate time to consider these data,

reviewers in the Exemplary Program Study run the risk both of
excluding strong programs and recommending weaker ones for
recognition.

Reviewers

We found that both recognition efforts used nonfederal
reviewers with little methodological or research expertise. This
has two implications. First, these review teams were not likely
to require effectiveness evaluations from applicants, and second,
the recognition program effort was not likely to produce strong
data on the effectiveness of these programs. Yet the lack of
these data is one of the chief impediments to progress in this
field.

Decisions

In the Drug-Free School Recognition Program, the reviewers'
recommendations were further reviewed by a second steering
committee of nonfederal individuals. Since these committee members
had no additional information, their evaluation function is
unclear. Nevertheless, the steering committee's final
recommendations have the power to veto or overturn the earlier
reviewers' suggestions (and did either one or the other in 10 cases
in 1989-90), and the committee can do this without consulting the
reviewers or clarifying any point with them. In contrast, we found

that recognition decisions in the Exemplary Program Study were based on the recommendations of the most informed reviewers.

Recommendations

We are recommending that the Secretary of Education and the Secretary of HHS review the policies of their respective recognition efforts in order to remove limitations that prevent consideration and evaluation of a wider variety of prevention strategies. We also recommend that they direct their respective recognition efforts to conduct systematic and comprehensive searches for applicants, clarify criteria, require data assessing program effectiveness, and supplement existing review panels and teams with individuals having backgrounds that allow skillful critique of effectiveness evidence. We are also recommending that the Secretary of Education eliminate the nonfederal steering committee's veto power over recommendations and that the Secretary of HHS add site visits to the data collection procedures and expand the work schedule to allow all reviewers sufficient time to assess applications.

This concludes my remarks, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.