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At risk, but overlooked New substance-abuse-prevention program teaches special-needs youths

By JoAnne Viviano
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Dr. Maria Demosthenous was excited about the ornate round box she held in front of 11-year-old Xavier Desotelle.

As the Columbus boy looked up at her from an examination table, she told him that the blue box with orange pompom fringe held something important.

“It’s something very special,” she said. “There’s nothing like it on the whole Earth, and it needs to be protected.”

Xavier peered inside as the doctor removed the lid. And he smiled. What he had discovered was his reflection.

The interaction was part of a new “Stop to Live” substance-abuse-prevention program at LifeTown Columbus, an indoor village in New Albany designed to teach life skills to special-needs students who visit from districts around the state.

Launched in March in partnership with Columbus City Schools, Stop to Live is being touted by its creators and other advocates as the first in the United States to address substance-abuse prevention for special-needs children. Plans are to roll it out nationally next year.

Developers say it was born out of the devastation and suffering caused by the opioid epidemic and the recognition that special-needs people are more at risk but are often overlooked when it comes to prevention strategies.

“There is a fire raging. There is an inferno consuming innocent lives, precious young lives, and something needs to be done,” said Rabbi Areyah Kaltmann, executive director of the Lori Schottenstein Chabad Center, where LifeTown Columbus is housed.



In 2016, an average of 175 Americans, including 12 in Ohio, died each day from drug overdoses, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Two-thirds of those deaths involved opioids. The number of overdose deaths has increased annually since at least 1999, when there was an average of 46 per day, of which 47 percent were opioid-related. Preliminary data show that the death toll continued to rise in 2017, averaging 186 deaths a day — 14 in Ohio — reported so far for the 12 months through Sept. 30, 2017.

People with disabilities are more at risk for substance abuse, according to studies referenced by Shaunacy Webster, Chabad House’s chief operating officer and curriculum co-author. She said this is because they might disproportionately experience depression and family trauma and might come to rely on prescribed medications.

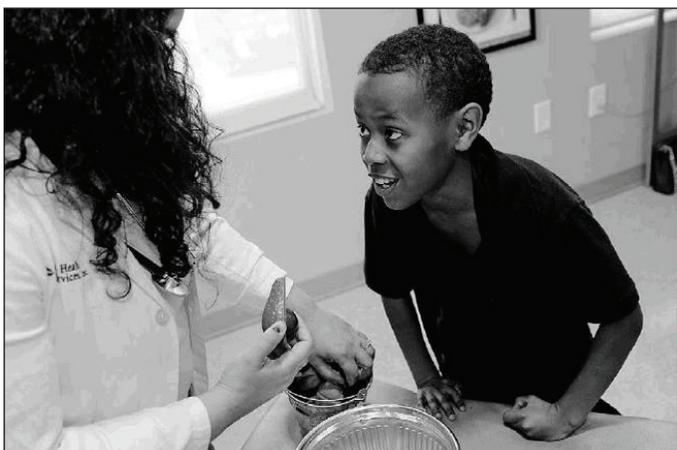
The six lessons of the program are spread throughout the school year and include activities for the classroom and at LifeTown, where students participate in one-on-one, hands-on activities with facilitators. A key factor is building self-esteem, Kaltmann said.

“If they have self-esteem and if they have self-worth, it just makes sense,” he said. “If I have a Rolls-Royce, why would I go break the windows? If I’m valuable, if I have something of importance, why would I ruin that?”

Lessons also address issues such as the difference between healthy and unhealthy choices, identifying trusted adults, prescription-medication awareness, making good choices and resisting outside pressures.

Each lesson includes a “spark” item given to children to help foster discussion with family members. The first is a compact mirror stamped “I am special.”

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In the end, children don capes and take home a superhero punch card showing the completion of each step in the program.

Xavier, a fifth-grader at Oakland Park Alternative Elementary School, is among the roughly 1,000 Columbus children participating in the program.

“Depending on what their disability is — which may be physical, it may be cognitive — they are just so vulnerable to being exploited, so we want to give them some tools,” said Kate King, director of health and community services at Columbus City Schools.

The initiative has gained support from a number of other educators, special-needs advocates and elected officials.

Susan Zelman, an executive director at the Ohio Department of Education, visited LifeTown last Monday and remarked that Stop to Live empowers youths to take control of their lives and advocate for themselves.

“I would love to see this become a national model,” said Zelman, a former state superintendent. “We need to replicate this.”

Tracy Plouck, director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services, called the effort innovative, revolutionary and desperately needed for a population that has not previously been specifically addressed. “I see this as an opportunity to study the long-term effects and help inform some change throughout the country,” Plouck said.

The 2018 budget for the program is \$200,000, including preparations for a national launch, with a combined \$31,000 committed by the Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board of Franklin County (ADAMH) and the county Board of Developmental Disabilities.

Interest has come from educators around Ohio as well as in Kentucky, West Virginia and Vermont. It took \$86,000 in time and materials to develop the program last year, Webster said; \$20,000 came from donations and the rest from LifeTown.

“If one child is fortified with the skills not to crumble in the face of peer pressure, then that’s a success,” Kaltmann said of the expense. “This is

going to be hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of lives we’re going to save, but for one life, we’d do it.”

Stop to Live addresses a group of children who should not be forgotten in the fight against substance abuse, said David Royer, the county ADAMH’s chief executive.

“I was encouraged to see them appreciate the fact that every child is capable of learning important information as it relates to potential misuse,” he said.

Jed Morison, chief executive and superintendent at the Developmental Disabilities board, believes Stop to Live has the potential to develop into a best practice.

“Kids who might have special needs or learning challenges might need a little extra guidance in terms of making good choices,” Morison said.

The Ohio State University College of Social Work will evaluate the first year of the program to determine whether children retain knowledge. Students will be asked a series of questions before and after their doctor visits, said Christy Kranich, research-project coordinator at the college.

“The college overall is really committed to looking at the opioid issue on multiple fronts,” she said.

Stop to Live also received some initial research assistance from the Ohio Colleges of Medicine Government Resource Center housed at Ohio State, where director Lorin Ranbom said there are many prevention programs for young adults, but nothing geared toward those who are intellectually disabled.

“Intellectually disabled patients are at a disadvantage,” he said. “And they need to be given as many tools as they can absorb to deal with the issues of daily life.”

To learn more about LifeTown Columbus, go to www.lifetowncolumbus.org, jviviano@dispatch.com @JoAnneViviano