

Testimony of Mary Alice McKenzie  
Before the United States Senate Committee of the Judiciary  
Rutland, Vermont  
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Thank you very much, Senator Leahy, for holding this very important Vermont field hearing of the Senate Committee of the Judiciary. This is indeed a critical time in Vermont because, as Governor Shumlin has bravely and publicly declared, we are facing serious challenges related to addiction and its consequences.

I am Mary Alice McKenzie the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Burlington. I am very grateful for this opportunity to testify about community actions we are taking in response to our challenges. I am most grateful for being given the chance to address the work being done in the interests of our most precious Vermont resource: children. The interests of children have not received enough attention in the Vermont discussion. And yet, it is a sad truth that children are often the first, and certainly are the most innocent, victims of addiction.

I and my colleagues, the Executive Directors of the other five Boys & Girls Clubs in Vermont, in Rutland, Brattleboro, Washington County, Vergennes and Randolph firmly believe that while addiction trends are bad, we CAN reverse them through comprehensive and coordinated actions. We believe that if Vermonters individually and collectively commit to actions that are unequivocally anti-addiction as well as anti-crime we can reduce the number of children who suffer the consequences of adult bad acts and poor choices.

The Boys & Girls Clubs in Vermont together serve thousands of Vermont children and youth from ages 5 to 18 every year. And although we differ from each other in certain ways, we share an identical mission to “inspire and enable youth in our communities, **especially those who need us most**, to realize their full potential as productive, healthy, caring and responsible citizens”. We share the view that we violate our mission if we do not actively engage in pushing back against addiction lures and against those who make money exploiting the vulnerable and causing harm to children. We are remarkably uniform in our responses to Vermont’s addiction problem not because we are similar in our political views or ideology. Rather, it is because we are all witnessing the abuse, the neglect, the damaged prospects of children that come as a consequence of addiction and drug related crime. The commonality of experience has caused us to acknowledge our role and responsibility in the fight for the well-being of the children who need us most.

In Burlington we sounded the alarm after seeing tangible evidence of increased drug trafficking impacting children in elementary, middle and high school grades. Kids began telling us that they were afraid to walk home after dark. Kids were followed, harassed and in a few cases assaulted by people under the influence of drugs. Thirteen and fourteen year old kids confided that they or their friends had been offered money to sell drugs. Some fifteen year old girls told us that they had been offered money for sex by people who were also selling drugs. We were told about guns being carried by people dealing drugs. We became aware of situations where children were neglected because there was no money left

for food. We learned that access to middle school aged girls had been given in exchange for drugs. We started seeing and hearing about gang affiliations. We, of course, made all the required reports to parents, police and DCF. But we also quickly realized that what we were experiencing was unlike anything we had seen before and that simply making required reports and expecting others to fix the problem was futile.

However, let me be very clear that good, coordinated law enforcement really matters. Without the coordinated, consistent work of the US Attorney's office combined with the resources of the Federal Agencies and the Burlington Police Department, the situation in our community would be far worse. And when those organizations started working very visibly together the community became visibly more safe. In addition, because of the leadership of Chief Michael Schirling, we often now get notice when arrests have been made in households where there are children. Sometimes, police officers will bring children directly to us so that the children are surrounded by support. Law Enforcement matters and while we must accept our own responsibility for action, we know that we will fail if law enforcement does not receive the support and the resources to do its' job.

In order to find out what we should do, we reached out to a wide range of people in Burlington. We invited schools, other youth serving organizations, DCF case workers, law enforcement officials, parents, landlords and others to a series of meetings. We learned that what we were seeing in our neighborhoods and what kids were telling us was being seen by many others. We also learned that many feared giving voice to the problem of drug addiction and drug related crimes. Some worried that going public would tarnish Burlington's reputation. Some feared that talking openly would set off a chain reaction of prejudice, discrimination and profiling. Others feared being discounted as just one more social do-gooder looking for a handout of public money. We were afraid too but took action anyway.

Some actions we have taken show success and some have failed. I would be happy to answer questions about failed actions. But for purposes of this testimony, I am going to focus on what has shown positive signs. Please understand that we are still finding our way through this and we certainly do not have all the answers, we are learning.

We reached out to and received help from Boys & Girls Club of America, specifically from Joe Mollner, the Director of Delinquency and Gang prevention programs at BGCA. A former Commander in the St. Paul Minnesota Gang Prevention Unit, Joe has a wealth of experience and a personal philosophy that we should never give up on any child. Joe came to Vermont for a three day review and assessment of our situation involving drugs, gangs and youth. He taught us how to survey our youth effectively. He also trained us in the methodology being used around the country to better serve and protect youth from the consequences of addiction and crime. The methodology involves a three pronged approach of prevention, intervention and suppression. Joe also gave us an invitation to apply for a specific grant that would have provided some funds to create a case management intervention program specifically designed for the most at risk youth. Unfortunately we had to decline that opportunity because the grant parameters, while appropriate for larger urban areas facing these same issues, were inflexible and unresponsive to our problems in Burlington, Vermont.

After the BGCA training help, we started to create forums for letting the kids tell us about what they were experiencing and about what they think they need from us. We have now surveyed and had group and individual conversations with many youth. And while there are some differences in what kids have told us, there are some very important consistent messages that are guiding us in the development of our actions. The consistent messages include:

“If you first start talking to me about drugs in high school, you are way too late. I smoked my first joint at (pick a number) from 8 to 12 years old.”

“If you tell me in high school to “just say no to drugs” or that if I do drugs I will die, I won’t listen to you. I know kids who bring weed or pills to school and/or to parties and no one I know has died yet.”

“If you only lecture me about drugs in health class in high school, that is a joke to me because it’s like just checking off the boxes of “healthy habits” so one day it’s don’t do drugs, the next day it’s how to cook a healthy meal.”

“If you are serious about me, treat me seriously, give me the facts, tell me what drugs do to my brain, tell me how to stay safe when I go to the party, because I will be at the party.”

These are some common messages from kids who are rich, poor and middleclass. They are of different races, religions and from different places. There are, of course, different messages from the minority of kids who are already involved in heavy using. They are the smaller number of kids who are already into making money by stealing and dealing. They are the minority but unfortunately they influence the majority.

I must speak for a moment about the complexity of some of those youth, those who are at high risk of becoming Vermont’s future inmates. We see and read about people from Brooklyn, the Bronx, Detroit, Chicago when they are arrested here for trafficking. We are outraged, and rightly so, that these people come here to sell products that cause such harm. What we do not discuss is that some of these same people have been coming here for a long time. They have extensive local networks and relationships here. They have born children here, children who are at very high risk. Like other communities, we must develop strategies to identify and intervene earlier and more effectively in the lives of these children. Very complicated issues exist here. Issues of confidentiality and of legislative, prosecutorial, judicial and defense bar philosophies. However, if we do not address this uncomfortable reality, our only recourse will remain arrest and incarceration when these youth reach a level of criminality that can no longer be ignored.

Thankfully, helping the majority is not quite as complicated. The majority want us to do more to keep them safe. They want to come to our sites more at night but they want to make sure they do not have to walk home after dark. They want the parks to be safe. They want to go to safe spaces on Saturday nights because the alternative is the streets, the parks or at homes where no adults are present. They want more team sport opportunities of all kinds. Often kids don’t get to play on school teams and so their options are limited. They want us to be clear about the rules of safety, drugs and alcohol.

We have listened, done a lot of soul searching and taken the following specific actions:

We reached out to the City and requested approval to take over a storage building in the center of the park so that we can create a new teen and academic center. This enables us to deliver more focused academic support and will create a safer park. This relationship with the City is just pure positive, we have a donor who believes in this project and has agreed to do the renovations, we have our amazing Chief of Police Mike Schirling actively supporting our plan, and we have a Mayor who really understands the power of community partnerships.

We are working very closely with The United Way of Chittenden County to find resources and relationships to create more effective prevention strategies and to educate our community about the realities of drugs, addiction and crime. One of the goals of the United Way is that “all people are free from substance abuse and its consequences”. The United Way is making connections all over Chittenden County to educate people who may think that addiction is someone else’s problem. Because of the United Way’s outreach efforts many now realize that addiction has an economic impact, a health care impact, an education impact, as well as a human impact that harms all of us.

Also, with the support of the United Way, we were able to find some flexible funding that is allowing us to create prevention strategies directly responsive to the needs of the kids we serve.

We have contracted with Spectrum Youth Services to develop the best policies, practices and culture for promoting health for a full range of children and youth of all ages.

We have adopted the language of the United Way and confirmed to kids that our goal is that “all youth are free from substance abuse and its related consequences”. We have explained to the kids that the Club is a health and safety zone. And we walk the talk. This has meant some emotional tough times for us because we have had to take action to remove the few who engaged in illegal or destructive behaviors. We offer help many times and in many ways. But if the behaviors continue, the youth cannot be with us. Hard as suspending a youth from coming to the Club is, as a result, the total number of youth coming to us has increased because more feel comfortable coming through our doors.

We have expanded our transportation capacity and our hours of operation. We now are open on Saturday nights for teens. We have also started our own basketball teams with a goal of being able to participate in the Burlington league next year. We have expanded our music programming for teens. We have expanded our academic programs for teens such that they can come to the Club right after school instead of waiting until the evening hours. We serve dinner now six nights a week. All these things were things we could do in direct response to what kids told us.

Obviously, these efforts must be funded. Our board is a tremendous strength for us and when they saw our growing challenges, they agreed that we had to take whatever action we could to keep more kids more safe. Together, we re-prioritized where we could and increased our fund raising goals when we had to. We are pushing forward with resolve to make our efforts sustainable. It will take time but we all know that failure is not an option.

Every Boys & Girls Club in Vermont is working hard to help in their communities. Larry Bayle at the Rutland Club is actively partnering with Rutland's very impressive Project Vision, helping in many ways to support youth living in hard hit areas of the City. Beth Baldwin Page at the Brattleboro Club is working with law enforcement to create coordinated responses to incidents involving youth. The Vergennes Club, specifically Mike Reiderer, has long been a recognized leader in the delivery of effective prevention programs both in the Club and in schools. Kreig Pinkham at the Washington County Youth Services Bureau Boys & Girls Club manages many direct service programs to help youth in need. In addition, there are serious efforts to mentor communities who have expressed interest in forming a Boys & Girls Club. For example, currently Larry Bayle is mentoring the communities of Randolph and Lyndonville as they form Boys & Girls Clubs.

And while much is being done, we know that we are only at the beginning. The actions we have taken are good but much better work must be done. The hard task now is to create a united front, on all fronts, if we are serious about sustaining an environment of health and safety for our children. As adults, we must accept our responsibility for reversing our trends. We must work together to find the financial, political and human capital needed for prevention, intervention (including treatment) and suppression of addiction and related consequences. All Vermont's children, especially those who need us most, depend on us to get this right.