

Christin D'Ovidio:

Welcome to the Power of Prevention podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you, of people who are working tirelessly in their profession. They work with their families in their communities to stop something unwanted from happening. And in this case, it's substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and who want to make New Hampshire a better place, where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We're hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention. The pandemic was hard on families, on schools, on other institutions that serve our community in New Hampshire. Our natural coping resources, and those of institutions were not available. So people had to figure out how to cope with quarantining, isolation, homeschooling, unemployment loss, and grieving without these supports and resources. Existing inequities widened.

Christin D'Ovidio:

To cope with the stress, many people increase their substance use during these isolating months. While we began to open up and return to business as usual, we know for some, this experience was still with us. Others are excited to get back into the swing of things. We're joined today by Traci Fowler. She's a senior program officer at the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. We're going to talk about what you've seen Traci in terms of prevention and what can be done to help people live, learn, and thrive again in New Hampshire. So welcome, Traci.

Traci Fowler:

Thank you so much for having me.

Christin D'Ovidio:

So I wanted to find out how the nonprofit sector has been handling the crisis through the perspective of this statewide philanthropic foundation?

Traci Fowler:

What we saw was that they really, without flinching rolled up their sleeves and mobilized to continue meeting their mission, continue to engage, working at the community level, really without missing a beat. We saw generous people come forward with resources when they were so desperately needed. And at the same time, we saw people angrily protesting public health measures, right?

Traci Fowler:

That are proven to slow the spread of disease. We saw more people vote in a presidential election than ever before, or that had since 1964. And at the same time, we know that we're less likely to trust our neighbors. We're less likely to engage with the BIPOC community, our BIPOC neighbors. So these kind of dichotomies that are existing, I think have been amplified and we're seeing them. And we're looking at them at figuring out how we move forward.

Christin D'Ovidio:

One of those dichotomies that emerged has been the mobilization of the BIPOC community or the black indigenous and people of color against systemic racism.

Traci Fowler:

That's been amazing to see.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Yes.

Traci Fowler:

In New Hampshire. And then at the same time, this kind of backlash, including threats of violence and a move to censor teaching about the shared history. So we're very much in a place where we recognize as a community foundation, the work that lies ahead. For communities in New Hampshire, it's enormous. It feels like both hopeful and overwhelming. Hopeful that we're talking about it, that we're aware. And overwhelming because it's a lot to sift through.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Though there are many ways the pandemic has spurred positive change, it's definitely been time of isolation where people have had to figure out ways to cope and how to respond to new realities. But are we in a better place?

Traci Fowler:

The isolation that kids experienced and that families experienced was very difficult for some of our prevention programs to be able to continue to respond and to continue to meet those needs. In the early moments, the behavioral health providers, literally from day one, I think we're already anticipating and thinking of ways to counteract what they knew was coming, which was the isolation and increased stress and the increased mental health needs and the impact on families. How are we going to respond when schools are remote?

Traci Fowler:

When kids aren't getting meals at school? When families aren't able to work? When childcare isn't able to happen? We're already thinking of ways to balance it out. Telehealth got stood up relatively quickly, and that was a massive effort across the state from multiple sectors to keep the connections alive and well. And I think the underlying piece for preventionist was connection. We know that we can't eliminate all risk, but we know that by increasing or layering in our protective factors, we can mitigate the impact of the risk. So that's what I saw preventionist doing across the state.

Christin D'Ovidio:

To maintain that connection, the prevention world was handing out phones and phone cards. Community health workers who speak multiple languages were knocking on doors to check in and connect resources. The expressions of humanity were beautiful and they were everywhere.

Traci Fowler:

There's countless stories of the school's social workers and the school clinicians who were on the school buses or driving behind the school buses, if they needed to, that were delivering meals to kids dropping off the school meals. They were right there behind the buses on the routes, handing out books, handing out resource packets, handing out school supplies, really just to get eyes on the kids and be able to show the kids that they're still there. There's still a connection there.

Traci Fowler:

Different youth programs pivoted to virtual meetings and kept the meetings going, even though it was virtual, they didn't want to lose the connection. So I think in those early moments, the prevention world, in the absence of being able to continue with their regular work that they were doing in a school setting or in a community setting, they just tried their hardest. And in a lot of ways were successful and just keeping connection alive so that families and kids wouldn't feel that they were alone. We need to keep building on the meat to it so that it's vibrant and can be responsive and can be ready when the next crisis comes.

Christin D'Ovidio:

And in this case, recognizing the problem is half the battle. According to Traci, for the past 10 years, the infrastructure in the behavioral health community has been very siloed, which can affect funding and prevent making real change.

Traci Fowler:

You're either doing substance misuse prevention or you're doing mental health prevention or a promotion. You can't do both of the things at one time, which is bananas from a preventionist standpoint and from a risk factor standpoint. So I've seen the system evolve to be hearing that and braiding more braiding of funding, more flexibility in funding. I've seen that both from the state and from philanthropy. If we're not honing our messaging around coping with stress and around healthy behaviors that kids can do to deal with the inherent stressors in their life, which they were talking about school stressors.

Traci Fowler:

But as time goes on, we know that it's more than that. It's especially in times of a pandemic for goodness sakes, it's parents overdosing, it's parents mental health needs, it's parents losing jobs, it's not having a safe place in their home, it's not... It's all of that at that we know are some of the most significant risk factors for kids that we, our prevention field has to be able to be responsive to and engage and help to mitigate the risk as much as possible if we can't eliminate it completely.

Traci Fowler:

So I've seen great progress. I mean, it's not like we're fully there, but we can really hone in as a community, as a state and as a communities on how to better prepare kids for managing through all of these complications of life and not turn to substances when things get really difficult. Because things will get really difficult and they just need to have the tools in their toolbox and the support systems in place. I've seen more conversation fast tracked because of this past year about flexible funding, braiding funding, mental health, and substance use integration than I have in these past 10 years. And it's been wonderful.

Christin D'Ovidio:

It has been wonderful. And Traci believes that it's all about seeing policy change and having those values embedded in state law.

Traci Fowler:

We're having all these conversations with funders and with the state agencies. And they're talking about, we're going to be deploying Narcan out through the networks and you guys are getting it out to communities and we're doing trainings and all of this. We're hearing from our first responders that they don't know what to do with those kids in the room. So over time we've built that response. We're getting more [inaudible 00:09:07] teams in place, we're talking about

early childhood trauma, ACEs has become a thing that are talking about and discussing as a state.

Traci Fowler:

But to me, it's showing how, as we build out a continuum of care, we can't forget that prevention has to be layered in always. And if we're not also addressing that full family unit and remembering that those kids are dealing with a lot of trauma with having substance use in their family and with having a parent almost lose a life or have lost a life. So I see those policy changes and embedding those values in writing, in state law and the 10 year mental health plan. I see those as big wins in this work of advancing behavioral health and advancing prevention. But it doesn't mean that we're at the finish line. We need to keep it going. We need to build on it and hold all of ourselves accountable for standing it up.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Speaking of ways to build on progress, Traci says there are a number of ways people can get involved when it comes to fighting racial inequity, political unrest, or the effects of the pandemic and the existing inequities that it has exposed.

Traci Fowler:

You can do that in a number of ways. I think we've got some amazing organizations out there who have the statewide perspective. There's New Futures, there's NAMI, both of which have such strong advocacy presence. And the Charitable Foundation of course supports both of them and is more than happy to have been able to do that over these past number of years and continue to do so.

Traci Fowler:

Also locally, I think having people recognize that even if they sign up for a mailing list, even if they attended training, the power of being able to connect locally to groups, whether it's a coalition or it's a community based group who is doing advocacy, it's always more powerful when our elected officials hear directly from their constituents amazing things happen when kids show up to the state house.

Traci Fowler:

And I've seen amazing things happen when parents stand up front of the room and share a story. It's connecting those local experiences to the infrastructure. So I think philanthropy absolutely has a role to play in being able to see where those gaps are and help local community groups. So I think advocacy is always my number one.

Christin D'Ovidio:

But what about those families that can't advocate for themselves or children who are alone? Traci says there are resources for those people as well, and it starts with your local school.

Traci Fowler:

There's pockets across the state where there's less access to resources, but I think school is a great place to start. I think that the work that is happening to build out a student assistance programming across the state to hopefully maintain that, to build out more positions in schools who understand what the community resources are, who are looking at a tiered approach to providing behavioral health supports. I think there's a lot more schools across the state, thanks to in large part, the work of the grants, like Project Aware and the work to build out multi-tiered systems of supports that schools are over really good place to start.

Traci Fowler:

But I think the work of connecting school resources to community based resources is always important. And building those connections with the community mental health centers, with the primary care physicians, the different providers across the state who may be the first point of contact for a child or for a family to make sure that those initial points of contact know who else to turn to is really important. And I think that's ongoing, but starting with the first circle of supports, whether it's at its schools. It could be calling 211 to figure out what's nearby.

Traci Fowler:

Who can I talk to right now? I think that the rolling out of 988 as our state's kind of crisis line is going to be important and make it easier as a suicide prevention lifeline. Because that's not just for individuals who are having thoughts of suicide or struggling themselves, but it's for family members and friends to call and say, "Man, I don't know what to do." How can I help? And if you're comfortable texting, you can text, but that's available 24/7. We have to start back there and then we can build on it. It's hopeful because there's a lot of good people out there doing work. And they're thinking exactly in that way.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I couldn't agree more, Traci. Well, while we continue to fight injustices with the power of prevention, we're happy to know that you're funding so many wonderful services.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Power of Prevention
Beyond COVID: Prevention in a Post Pandemic Time with Traci Fowler
Transcript

Thanks for listening to the Power of Prevention. And special thanks to our guest Traci Fowler. For more information on the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, go to NHCF.org. If you liked this episode and want to hear more, please like, and subscribe and consider following us. You can find us at drugfreenh.org and subscribe at Apple Podcast, Spotify or Stitcher. We'll catch you at our next episode.