

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

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, the people who are working tirelessly for their professions, the families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening. In this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place, where we all have the opportunity to live, love, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention. I'm your host, Christin D'Ovidio.

Christin D'Ovidio:

We are joined by Julie Nicknair-Keon, licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor with Warren Street Family Counseling Associates in Concord. She was formerly the Director of Counseling at New England College in the Wellness Center in Henniker. We also have Ashley Desrochers, Public Health Program Manager from Stratford County Public Health Network.

Christin D'Ovidio:

They're here to talk about what they've seen in terms of supporting young adults during this phase in their development, and to better understand why our young adults are struggling, and how their unique challenges can be addressed. To start things off, I asked each of them what this population needs to live, learn, and thrive in New Hampshire. Let's hear first from Julie.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

During my time at New England College, the things that we found particularly during the pandemic, but even prior to that, was a sense of being connected, and because there's a huge sense of feeling isolated. And particularly in rural areas, even on a college campus, many of our young adults didn't find ways to connect with each other. They really struggled with how to make friends, how to find their people. And so that feeling of isolation, that feeling of loneliness, was really difficult. And also, normalizing a lot of these young adult experiences. There's a lot of anxiety and they're such big thinkers, and so they're exploring on social media and on the internet, and they're really just trying to understand their process in their own human development. And some of the things that I think young people do anyway, is a lot of that comparison and it creates that sense of anxiousness. And, am I okay? And, how do I fit into all this? Those are the big things that we found were a challenge, and that I've experienced even now.

Christin D'Ovidio:

That makes sense. Ashley, how do you feel about this? What have you been seeing that young people are needing to live, learn, and thrive in New Hampshire?

Ashley Desrochers:

Sure. What I've really seen both from the data and locally, is that financial insecurity plays a significant role in the health outcomes of the younger people in our region. Looking at data, I really see that in our region, kind of to Julie's point, the young adults and younger people actually have less support from parents. They tend to lean on extended family members and

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

friends, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's certainly something just to know if you're working in this area or thinking about those protective factors for younger people. And, certainly if people, or organizations, or leadership would like to make sure that younger people thrive and stay in New Hampshire, that we really need to focus on those financial factors, those economic conditions, living wage and housing costs.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Working on the financial factors would make a huge difference, because when people are given the tools, resources, and opportunities, they can solve their own problems more easily. And they avoid these unhealthy forms of coping. According to Ashley, it's also really about finding that support person, and then getting connected to the right resources.

Ashley Desrochers:

I definitely say that being a support person is really important and connecting them with resources or maybe things they don't know about. Maybe it's a program that helps with housing. Maybe not a mental health counselor, because sometimes they're hard to come by, just making sure that, one, it's normalized. Yes, this is really hard. We're all feeling this together. You're not alone.

Ashley Desrochers:

And really just trying to figure out what that individual person needs in order to thrive. So, everyone's different. For me, maybe I like to be outdoors, maybe I like to do yoga, maybe somebody else needs something else. So, trying to think about what are those things that recharge us and keep us present. And also, what are some supports that are needed, like what can I do to help? Sometimes I feel like we really underestimate the power of that question, What do you need?, and asking that question to that individual person.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

That's interesting, because when I was at a college campus, and I think if you explore a lot of the college campuses in New Hampshire and including our community colleges, there are resources, and a lot of the colleges provide lots of different opportunities. And yet we often don't see our young adults actively engaging. And, again, not all of them because many of them will, and they'll find that thing. Oh, I really like music, so I'm going to attend the music performance. Or, I really want to play ultimate Frisbee, so I'm going to go and join that club.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

But I'm going to go back to the original concerns of that isolation and that anxiety. It's getting them to get out and to be able to access that. And for me and my experiences in working with a lot of providers for young adults, it's helping them truly to normalize. It can be scary to go out and make a new friend. It can be frightening to go out and try something different. How do I take those risks? How do I put myself out there, knowing that I might get rejected and be okay with that? And I think when we ask, what do we provide for them?, it really is finding those individuals, and even sometimes there's trying to connect them with online resources that can do that.

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

There's a lot more online support out there that don't cost any money. There's a lot of apps that now young people can access. And so, we try to connect them with those. One, the apps and the resources, not only to explore, how do I get connected with this bigger world? But also, how do I manage this stress? How do I manage this anxiety? How do I manage this sense of feeling lonely? All of us want to be validated, so truly it's a community approach to doing that.

Christin D'Ovidio:

In addition to approaching this as a community, it's also really important to remember there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Here's Julie.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

I can say our young people don't just fit in a box. They come from so many vast areas, even in New Hampshire. And, sometimes I think we have these beliefs that there's this narrow opinion about what our young adults are and who they are. So, I think it's finding that right person that knows how to look at all of who our young people are, and then how to identify what the resources are, being creative with presenting them to young people. How do we talk their language? How do we get them to hear us?

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

And their language is vast. We have young people that, yes, they're okay with phones and computers, but they're not, they're really connected to the outdoors. How do we connect with them on that level?

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

We have young people that are gamers, and really the internet and computers are so valuable and so important to them. How do we connect on that level? I think it's finding that person that has that ability, that creativity, to be able to do that, really listening, and then trying to apply what resources we have.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Ashley, I'll put that question to you, describing the work of young adult coordinators. How would you describe it?

Ashley Desrochers:

Yeah, I was just thinking as Julie was talking, thinking about who are those young people? Who are those younger people, and not all of them are in college. Some of them went straight to maybe a tech program, or right into the workforce. At least in our area there's a lot of large manufacturing companies. So, if you're an employer, what can you do to support young people?

Ashley Desrochers:

Same thing, ask that question, what do you need? Am I a recovery-friendly workplace? Is this person in recovery? Are they impacted by substance use disorder, or mental health, whether

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

themselves or their family? Do they not have childcare resources? What can my company do to support this population?

Ashley Desrochers:

For me, it's really been looking at evidence-based programs and practices. I'm master trainer of a program called Botvin Lifeskills™, and it's really all about building that resiliency and those protective factors in high school and in middle school.

Ashley Desrochers:

Again, that program got a little bit disrupted, but I think it really took me out of that. What does this individual person need to be ready to transition, but what do they need from the community? What does the community landscape look like? So really, just advocating for those program services and those prevention measures that really support this population.

Ashley Desrochers:

And interestingly enough, younger people experience the same sort of health disparities as older adults. So, really just trying to get everybody on the same page that younger people have a lot in common with that age group. And also, what does that group need? Can we connect them together?

Christin D'Ovidio:

New Hampshire young adults value hard work and like to play hard, too. Julie talks about how sometimes this philosophy can make for risky behaviors.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

There's a philosophy in New Hampshire, and I tell folks, I am born and bred in New Hampshire. I've been here pretty much my whole life. And, there is this kind of philosophy, work hard, play hard. And that's what we do. And if I can get up every day and go to work, and then I might use my substances either before work, or at work, or even at the end of the day, as long as I can get up, go to work, get my job done, then that's okay. And I think there's a lot of naivete in what that is, especially in young adults. So if they see that, and it might not necessarily be within their family, it might be in their workplace. I think particularly in the hospitality industry, it's a huge industry for the State of New Hampshire. And that's a big belief system in there.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

If we present different opportunities for our young people to connect with each other after work or before work that doesn't necessarily involve alcohol, what would that look like? Because that will also help the industry in the long run with decreasing people calling out sick, and retaining people, and really just creating a healthy work environment. Work hard, play hard doesn't necessarily mean work hard, drink, smoke, use pot, and then go back to work again. Play hard can mean going out hiking. It can mean going kayaking. I'm a big outdoors person, so those are the first things I think of, but there's so many other things that people can do that doesn't have to be connected with alcohol and other drugs. If we're going to choose, choose how do I do it in a

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

manner that reduces the risk of harm to myself or others, and still allows me to be a healthy, productive, and happy adult.

Ashley Desrochers:

And along those lines, I totally agree. Looking at risk reduction and not just assuming that being substance free is for everybody. That's really, I think, the backbone of what recovery can mean and what harm reduction can mean. And there's this other piece, too, that really came out of that young adult needs assessment, which was that one thing that young adults in New Hampshire are excited about, is their voice being heard. Or, getting into civic opportunities and even politics. So, maybe for certain groups of young people, those programs that Julie's speaking to, maybe they're not accessible because they work three jobs. Maybe they're in a really rural town and there's not a lot of opportunity. What can they get connected to? People in this age group, they really want to be a positive change agent. And that gives us meaning, as people. But, this is really important if people can feel like their voice can make a change, and it can create an environment where there's diversity, inclusion, and policy change.

Christin D'Ovidio:

In a state like ours that has higher alcohol use rates than surrounding areas, how do we go about tackling these statewide issues differently than our neighbors?

Ashley Desrochers:

Every community is different. We serve at a regional level, so sometimes even what works in Rochester might not work in Dover, might not work in Milton, might not work in Lee. So, being able to have those conversations with leaders to even just say, hey, have you thought about this population of people? Have you thought about these factors? And sometimes the answer's no. So, just knowing who your audience is and what they care about. Maybe it's retaining their workforce, maybe it's substance use. And it all really can differ. Just knowing the resources that are in your area and who are the people that care about these things can also really make an impact.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

Yeah, and I think that is important, because it is New Hampshire and there is limited transportation. You have these very rural areas. So, how do we talk to folks in the business industry? We have a low unemployment, but they want people to work, and yet how do we get them there? We also know human beings, if they work, they feel productive, they feel connected. I think that's another component to this, is how do we get our young people to be able to be connected and get there and feel productive, especially if they don't have the funding to buy a car. I always say, for young people getting a car is a sense of freedom. And yet, that's not possible for a lot of folks. But I'm not necessarily saying that having public transportation across the state is the answer either.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

I think it is, is thinking creatively. We used to have a lot of mentoring programs for children, and that was all volunteer. And eventually, some of these businesses started their own internal

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

mentoring programs to attract young people to their employment. And it ended up being, what an amazing opportunity to have this experienced person. That's part of the creativity and helping them find that transportation.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

Started helping young people, how do I manage my money? How do I find my own place to live? I think in the long run, it's an amazing opportunity. We used to have, I always say, back in the old days. But basically, they were mentorships, whether it was for carpentry, for electrical work, for plumbing. And, I think you can do that in all industries, and you'd have this person already there, this older person that could provide that guidance. And, I think of our elderly population. They have such gifts to offer. And how can we combine those groups together to be able to do that?

Ashley Desrochers:

I totally agree.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Yeah.

Ashley Desrochers:

And I also think back to the piece that you said about we have a really high alcohol consumption rate. We are in one of the states with the least access to substance use and mental health services. I wonder if those things are connected. What do you think? So, making sure that healthcare is available. If you're an employer, are there healthcare services that younger people can access? Maybe they don't have a car, but could they work from home? Do we support that? Those sorts of pieces. Are we going to continue to allow insurance companies to reimburse for virtual behavioral health services? It's all that infrastructure that really needs to be looked at, at that level to make sure that people can live, and support themselves, and really access services in those basic needs.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I think that's great. You're both really talking about those systems level and cultural understanding of what it is to be a New Hampshire resident, and be part of the State, and be connected. You're really talking to those pieces and putting out some great suggestions, and really speaking directly to a lot of the things that were in that Voices report that were what the young people in our State said that they needed. It's not always, I'm in crisis. It's, I can't get a car. I'm not able to manage my money. I can't achieve growth in my employment. I'm stuck in this place.

Ashley Desrochers:

Or, I can't find housing. That's the hottest topic. There needs to be more state and local level action to make sure that people can be housed. We need to increase our housing stock, but we also need to make sure that it stays affordable, and that younger people and older adults aren't being pushed out of the state or even their homes and displaced because of that affordability.

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

I can say from a mental health standpoint, I know some of the reasons clinicians and providers don't want to move to New Hampshire, is it is an expensive state to live in. I don't think people realize how expensive it is. Part of it is, how do we recruit? There are a lot of mental health providers out there, but how do we recruit them? How do we recruit a diverse population of providers to be able to want to come to New Hampshire? And again, as Ashley said, if we have them here, where do we house them? That's the other piece is then trying to find affordable housing and things like that.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

The other component that's really happening a lot in mental health is that reimbursement rate. Right now, I receive insurance, and we're really working to figure out how can insurances reimburse for continued telehealth. Telehealth, whether it was by virtual or telephone health, because not everybody has the access to virtual. That's the other thing. So, insurance companies are now saying, well, we might not pay for telephone, but only pay for telehealth. And yet, we have places where people don't have, they don't have computers. So then, their insurance isn't going to pay for that, even though the State of New Hampshire says it's legal and we're allowed to do that.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

There's some political aspects that are happening and big corporation aspects. And then there's reimbursement rates. Our lowest income families have, whether it's New Hampshire families or Medicaid and Medicare for our disabled and elderly, they reimburse at a lower rate. And that's not just a New Hampshire thing, that's a national thing. I know that's being addressed. That is starting to change a little bit, but it is finding providers that are willing to say, it's okay, this is why I'm in mental health. This is why I want to provide these services.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

So again, going back to that when we're recruiting, we really have to, and recruiting to bring in more providers, really making New Hampshire an affordable place to live. I think right now people want to live here. Our COVID rates are pretty low. Our state is a beautiful state. Although we're not the most diverse state, I think we have a reputation of being very supportive of people, and it sounds kind of corny. And I know it's going to sound really corny, but we have a reputation of being pretty kind and pretty respectful to each other. I'm not going to say it's across the board, but it's one of those marketing tools, and it's great. And it's really expensive. And there's not a lot of housing. So we have to figure out from a bigger level how to address that as well. So then we can meet those needs of having providers and bringing in really creative folks to support our young people.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Speaking of creativity, some of our young adults are parents in the workforce. So, I asked them, how they support those young adults who are young parents and suffering with these dual issues themselves?

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

Ashley Desrochers:

Certainly, I think one of the biggest things we can focus on as well, and I'm just going to go back to the systems piece. I've worked in systems for like 11 years, so I can't help but not, is affordable childcare, accessible childcare. Making sure that, okay, if somebody can't get to childcare, how do we bring that to them? How do we be flexible about that? How do we listen to what parents need, and really building up those to know, okay, this is where I can get help. This is where somebody can give me support as a parent. And where are those programs? Where are those family resource centers? Is there a place I can go that's inclusive for all ages, so I can get outside and I can bring my daughter with me. How does that happen? And yeah, certainly those programs in middle and high school are so crucial.

Ashley Desrochers:

You have to think, if there's a younger parent and they have a child in school, does that child have access to those services? Are we looking at that comprehensive level? Are we taking care of young people's young people? What does that look like?

Ashley Desrochers:

Making sure that there's that infrastructure and foundation for public health that I will just say is sometimes not with it in New Hampshire. In my experience oftentimes working directly with individuals, we sometimes send them out of state for services and that's just to me is not acceptable. So, making sure that we have that infrastructure in this State that really is going to meet those needs that are pivotal and really crucial for people to thrive.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

One of the things, and I know this might seem a little off of that, but that I think about, especially with high school and then even we could tie this into businesses and things like that, but you often hear schools saying, what can we be doing different? Our curriculum and things like that. And again, some of the things that we used to have. I feel like I'm always this kind of older person saying these things, but we used to have a home economics class that was, it was a requirement, and a home maintenance course, and kind of combine that. And those I think they're still electives in a lot of schools, but school systems really started to shift towards college preparation for a lot of our students. We do have our technical ed programs, which I think are wonderful. And a lot of our larger schools have those, and then the smaller schools send their students out.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

But I think those teaching our young folks those basic skills and how to do those things, how to maintain my home, my apartment, how to find a job, how to grocery shop, how to cook. How do I find those support systems if I don't have them on the outside? If I'm a young parent, how do I explore daycare? How do I know what that is, and find healthy daycare? And then I think our schools can do some of that, but then again some of these businesses can start to build that into their systems, whether it's a mentor or something like that. That way, they're getting those life skills. And that's really what they are, is they're life skills.

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

And when we think about young adults developmentally, they're trying to figure out so many things and their brain still isn't fully developed, so that ability to stop, think, and process isn't quite there. So, I think we do have to provide it for them. Sometimes there's expectation they'll just figure it out. And yet, we're asking them to figure these things out and developmentally they're not there yet.

Ashley Desrochers:

I totally agree, Julie, and it reminds me of every single module of the life skills curriculum that I'm trained in. It's coping skills. It's budgeting. It's time management. It's goal setting. So, what's this big goal, but how do I get there? What are those little steps that get me there? All those pieces are so important. Coping skills. How to communicate effectively. All of those things really need to be foundational, and to Julie's point, if I don't have those ... I'm saying me, I don't mean me. I'm just saying that to get, you know. If I don't have those resources and those skills, how am I going to emerge into an environment where those things are needed?

Ashley Desrochers:

And I agree that, and I hear it all the time, where are those foundational skills in high school and in middle school? And I've even heard this directly from teens like, I don't have that. I need somebody to teach me how to do those things. How do I budget? How do I cope through this? What's a healthy way of doing that? So obviously, I'm going to keep plugging that program because I wish that everyone would adopt it, especially with workforce shortages and teachers. It's a nice little plugin. Making sure that we're looking at all of our resources and leveraging them.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

To be honest, and that was one of the things that it wasn't necessarily curriculum based, but there were components pulled out of different curriculums that we did at the college. Because again, there's an assumption, oh, they're at college. They have all these skills. And a lot of our students didn't have those skills. And, I think a lot of parents and support people would laugh and think was kind of funny. Oh, they saved \$4,000 to last them for the year, and they spent it all in the first two months. And that's kind of scary when you think about it, because they are impulsive and all of a sudden they didn't know how to manage their money. And then all of a sudden they didn't have a way to get home. Or, they get a refund check and they don't think I should put that aside. I need to save that and start paying off my student loans. They don't have those skills.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

Those are some of the programs that we also offered through our health educator. She actually connected in with our student financial services folks, and they started holding mini workshops together. I have to tell you, they were well attended. Students came to those. Part of it was marketing. How do we get them to come, and how do we entice them to come and attend this? But they did.

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

How do I find my job in the summertime? And we have folks that are career and life planning folks. Oftentimes people think they're there just to plan for after graduation. But they didn't. They were really helpful in helping young people formulate a resume, just how to find a job that works not only with their skill level and their interest level, but within their region. How do I get myself to that job? How do I interview? How do I dress for an interview? All of those kinds of things.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

And we do those large mass hiring fairs, and I have to be honest, I haven't attended them so I'm not sure exactly what they look like. But I'd be curious, is there an arena there of people that can support our young person. All right, you want to go out and you want to find a job. Let me help you.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Before we closed out our discussion with the young adult coordinators, Ashley made me aware of an important funding change happening in New Hampshire in the near future.

Ashley Derochers:

One piece that is missing, these young adult strategies programs will cease to be funded at the end of the next fiscal year, which is in July of next year. So, just putting it out there that this age group still needs, I don't want to say now more than ever, because I'm sick of those cliches from the pandemic, but it's so true, we need this infrastructure. Anything that anyone can do to make sure that we have that public health infrastructure at that systems level, please advocate for that and know that, that's going to go away.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Can you speak more to that? Why is that funding going away? Where does it come from?

Ashley Desrochers:

The original funding came from SAMSA, which is the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration. And it's not atypical for public health funding to go away. It's pretty common, something's funded for a certain extended period of time and then you have to find sustainable ways to keep it going. Thankfully, the Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Services found another pot of money to keep these strategies moving forward. Until then, technically they would've ended in, I think, September. It's again, pretty normal for funding to go away and have to find that sustainability locally, so if there's anybody local in Stratford that really wants to invest in these programs or strategies, I'm here.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

I think the pieces that I wanted to make sure got heard, again, is really promoting risk reduction across the State. We've done a pretty decent job of, and we have the data to prove it, when we promoted safe driving, not don't drive under the influence, we can show that there was a decrease in injury when we really started working on promoting that.

SUPPORTING NH'S YOUNG ADULTS: WHERE CAN COMMUNITIES PUT THEIR ENERGY?

Christin D'Ovidio:

We may have a long way to go in terms of risk, production, and education, including how we can promote sober living communities, given that most young adults don't even know that they're out there. But one thing always remains, and it's the power of prevention. So, when I asked them what they think the definition of prevention is, this is what they had to say.

Julie Nicknair-Keon:

Prevention and substance misuse is as simple and as complicated as we want to make it. There are absolutely proven programs, proven approaches, including risk reduction, including education for our young people. And we have to want to invest in that, believe that it's worth it, not just for our young people, but for our entire community, for our entire state. And being able to connect all of that to the success of not only our community, but our state and our young people. And it's worth the investment. And it's not necessarily just money. It's the time and it's the energy as well.

Ashley Desrochers:

I would say that prevention is a menu. It's not one thing, and it doesn't look the same for every person. It doesn't look the same for every community. But it works and it's possible, but we have to invest in it. And sometimes it's a multi-layered approach. Sometimes it's as simple as asking a question to somebody that you care about. And I'd also say it's not just focusing on substance misuse, it's looking at all of the intersecting issues that impact substance misuse.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Thanks for listening to the Power of Prevention. And a special thanks to our guests, Julie Nicknair-Keon, licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor with Warren Street Family Counseling Associates, and Ashley Desrochers, Public Health Program Manager with the Stratford County Public Health Network. If you liked this episode and want to hear more, please like and subscribe, and consider following us at drugfreeNH.org. And subscribe at Apple Podcast, Spotify, or Stitcher, and we'll catch you on our next episode. Thanks for listening.