

# THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 7

## A Youth's Perspective on Substance Misuse and Prevention & Mental Health Wellness

**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 for their professions, their families, and their communities, to stop something unwanted from happening, in this case, substance misuse.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** 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, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** Involving youth in the prevention of substance misuse engages multiple of the known protective factors that get at the root cause of substance use. When youth have opportunities to engage with mentors, build connections to family, schools, and community, and develop meaningful skills and interests, they're most likely to avoid or delay substance use. Governor Sununu recognized the power of convening youth around the prevention of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances, when he established the Governor's Youth Advisory Council on Substance misuse and Prevention.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** The purpose of the council is to advise the governor from a youth perspective, on legislation, events and media pertaining to substance misuse, for the people of New Hampshire. So, in this episode, you're going to hear how young people across New Hampshire are rewriting the script on substance use in their schools and communities, through involvement with social media campaigns, the arts, theater, and education and training. And they're going to break down this misconception that most youth use substances, and they're going to replace it with empathy and knowledge and resilience, and all the while shaping statewide policy, so young people like themselves live happier and healthier lives.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** Today, we're here with Eliza Zarka and she's the Addiction and Behavioral Health Coordinator for the Office of Governor Chris Sununu. And we also have Jacob Lebroda and Hailey Dubois, and they're members of the Governor's Youth Advisory Council. Welcome, and thank you so much for joining me today.

**Eliza Zarka:** First, I also want to say thank you so much for having us. I know the council is so excited to, no pun intended, be partnering with the partnership, and we're really excited for this opportunity. I just want to throw my thank you in there as well. So, the Governor's Youth Advisory Council on Substance Misuse and Prevention, otherwise known as GYAC, because it's kind of a mouthful, a little bit like my title. So, I'll refer to it as GYAC throughout the podcast.

**Eliza Zarka:** It's a government council made up of high school students that was formally established by an executive order from Governor Chris Sununu. The council was actually informally established, so to speak, in 2017, as a direct result of the Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation partnering with the Drug Enforcement Administration. They hosted an opioid summit at the Southern New Hampshire University Arena in Manchester. It was thousands of high school students going to that summit to learn about the opioid crisis and epidemic.

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**Eliza Zarka:** And the governor attended that event, spoke at the event and actually had the opportunity to interact with high school students who were affected by this, which was virtually everyone in the room. And it was at that event that he realized the youth perspective is something that he's missing when in these conversations. So, the DEA and the Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation called the governor to action, to establish a council that would offer that youth perspective.

**Eliza Zarka:** So, the governor gets a lot of information from high-level, kind of the more boring, but necessary stuff like data and briefings. And it's very important to him to understand what's actually happening on the ground, whether it's visits he does or meetings he has, or he utilizes his staff to do the same, or establishing councils like this one. The council serves as a direct pipeline to the governor, so whatever the youth are experiencing and tell me, goes directly to the governor.

**Eliza Zarka:** So, I serve as the governor's liaison on the GYAC, as well as Dave Mara, the governor's advisor on addiction and behavioral health. And our role is essentially to take the messages that all the youth on the council are coming to the meetings with, and provide that directly to the governor, so he understands what the youth are experiencing, because while he has kids himself, he's a little removed from what actually happens in high schools, middle schools. It's been a minute since even I've been there.

**Eliza Zarka:** So, he really just established it to understand the youth perspective while also charging them with educating other youth, because this council's made up of up to 21 members. And besides advising the governor, also their role is to educate youth in New Hampshire, as well as come up with projects and opportunities for beyond those 21 members. So, it's essentially just educating, advising the governor and making sure that the youth voice is being heard, where there's spaces where that's not always the case.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** I mean, what is the benefit of involving youth in substance use prevention, where there are adults leading in that place?

**Eliza Zarka:** Involving youth in messaging and policies that affect them is key to moving in a direction of progress, because I think that when you're in high school and middle school, adults aren't always the age group that you're listening to. And I think I'm still lucky in the sense that I just turned 25, so they refer to me as a near peer where sometimes I can get through to them, sometimes I can't. I'm hoping maybe little sunscreen and retinol regimen will keep me in the near peer category a little bit longer, but that's a different type of prevention.

**Eliza Zarka:** So, I think that I can sometimes reach youth, but what's really going to get through to them is youth messaging from their peers. So, I think that by taking their perspective into account, it's making more effective messaging, because they know what they're going to listen to. I mean, I know who I did and didn't listen to when I was in high school, and I think it's similar for them, where they're much more likely to listen to a fellow classmate than they are to adults.

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**Eliza Zarka:** And if adults are the only ones producing the messaging around the opioid crisis and substance misuse, I think that they run the risk of missing the mark. And I think this council does a great job of offering that youth perspective to the governor, to inform his decisions. Like for example, they just wrote a letter of support for a piece of legislation that will require all student IDs in schools to have the Suicide Hotline number on it.

**Eliza Zarka:** So, the youth council saw that as an important and key message that they wanted the governor to know they support, so they produced the letter. I handed it directly to him, he saw it. He said, "Yes, I have youth behind me on this. I understand where they're coming from." And he also wrote a letter of support to the legislature supporting that particular piece of legislation. So, that's just one example of him taking into account the youth perspective.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** Wow, that's really great, and a wonderful idea too. When we were talking and preparing for this interview, you mentioned this deliberate structure of the, you say the GYAC, is that how you say it?

**Eliza Zarka:** I say GYAC. Yep.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** GYAC. GYAC. And you were talking about this importance of also working with certified prevention specialists. And can you share a little bit about that too?

**Eliza Zarka:** So, I think it was intentionally structured that way so that the youth would always have an adult to go to, who they know as a fact was an expert in that field.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's a great strategy. Thank you. What is your passion for prevention?

**Hailey Dubois:** Thank you, Christin. I honestly have a lot of reasons for staying drug and alcohol-free. First and foremost, my mental and physical health. I mean, I've seen what drugs and alcohol can do to you and how it can affect the people in your life. And I would also like to be able to accomplish the abundance of goals I have for my future. Lastly, but definitely not least, my friends and family. I've seen what it's like having somebody in your life with an addiction and I would never want to put the people I love through that.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** So, Hailey, you had some great reasons, personal reasons that mean a lot, I think, to why you're working on the council. Can you tell me a little bit more about the work that you're doing and how that really is informing that?

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah, for sure. So, my inspiration for these reasons I have for staying drug and alcohol-free led into me wanting to start the social media subcommittee on the council. So, I put eight or nine of us together and we make posts every two to four weeks to put on our Instagram. Basically, I think that resonates with my reasons for my passion for prevention and how it helps get these words out to youth from our perspective, directly from these members that are creating these posts.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great. That's great that you did that and you're doing that too. What are some of the focuses of your messages that you put out?

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**Hailey Dubois:** We focus on giving out as much information as possible, as truthful as possible, to try to get the word out to these teams in a way that will connect with them creatively, but also give them the information that they need to say drug and alcohol-free.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** So, Jacob, I'd like to ask you today, what is your passion for prevention?

**Jacob Lebroda:** Of course. Yeah. So, first of all, just thank you so much for featuring me today. I'm super excited to represent the Governor's Youth Advisory Council and just discuss my personal reasons for involving myself in such a great cause like substance misuse prevention advocacy.

**Jacob Lebroda:** So, based on what Eliza said earlier, I totally agree with, about how us as youth definitely have a stronger connection to our younger peers around us, just because we do have that status as students in school that adults do not have. And so as a result of that status, we have a unique perspective on the issue of substance misuse. And we are also personally affected by substance misuse, even though we are young.

**Jacob Lebroda:** So, a common misconception that many people seem to have about substance misuse advocacy is that there's a minimum age requirement for involvement. However, what's so special about the Governor's Youth Advisory Council is that we prove that misconception wrong and we are able to show that there's not a minimum age requirement for any sort of substance abuse prevention advocacy efforts. Just because we do have very unique perspectives and we want to utilize that in our advocacy.

**Jacob Lebroda:** Additionally, kids do love to be involved in the community and find opportunities for advocacy in leadership, so they'll definitely remain dedicated, which I totally think is something that's important, especially for a council like this. And even political officials like Governor Chris Sununu himself, recognize this truth, which is why there is this youth council in the first place, just to ultimately gain a youth perspective on the drug crisis in New Hampshire.

**Jacob Lebroda:** With regards to some of my personal reasons now, just in my community, I've noticed the negative effects that substance misuse specifically has on mental health, whether the affected person has been a family member, or a friend, or even just a peer. And I want to ensure that as someone who is a mental health advocate, I can protect my own mental wellbeing while simultaneously serving as a role model for all of those people around me, in my community.

**Jacob Lebroda:** And I'm passionate about living a drug-free life, just so I can inspire myself and others to be the best people possible. So, essentially, that is just my primary reason as to why I joined the Governor's Youth Advisory Council in the first place, just because I want to prove everyone wrong, that there's not a minimum age requirement to being involved in these types of efforts. And in addition to that, just really want to be a role model for those around me.

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**Christin D'Ovidio:** I think that's great. I mean, even hearing the passion when you guys describe your involvement is inspiring. And I think that we're seeing young people lead the way in a lot of areas, Greta Thunberg with the environment. And you guys are leading the way in New Hampshire around substance use prevention, I think that's wonderful. So, Jacob.

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yes.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** You really do have a lot of passion in what you're talking about.

**Jacob Lebroda:** Thank you.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** You're welcome. So, from your perspective, when you're paying attention to messaging, what gets your attention and then how do you use this to reach youth?

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yeah. Great question. Thank you so much for asking. So, I think very specifically, but various social media campaigns and even trends are definitely something that I believe youth like myself pay attention to for messaging purposes. So, just if you're not too familiar of what I mean exactly. Essentially just something like, "Oh, repost this content to show your support for this specific public health issue." Anything of that sort, I just think is definitely a great way to promote youth engagement with the content they see instead of just having them see it and keep scrolling past.

**Jacob Lebroda:** So, that is definitely what I think the Governor's Youth Advisory Council has been trying to do with our own social media, just because youth definitely pay attention to these types of platforms. So, specifically, we take advantage of Instagram since most of our members use that social media platform, and all of us GYAC kids just repost the content that has been made by our social media committee to show our own followers. And then in return, those followers of ours may even repost our content for their followers and then, et cetera. So, it just keeps going in a constant loop.

**Jacob Lebroda:** And hopefully, just our aim is to continue to repost and share all of the content on our Instagram account, which is @nh.gyac, if anyone is interested in following it. And as a result of that, we just hopefully are trying our best to increase overall traction on these types of online sites.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** Thank you. So, thinking about the involvement that you have and all this message crafting and how you're involved in the GYAC, how does that work? How do you address this root cause or the root causes of underage substance use and substance misuse?

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah. So, in our messaging, we like to include a lot of resources to help kids get the help that they need. We also like to encourage kids to talk with one another and even at our meetings and when we, as members, get together every month, we like to communicate about the problems that we see and the things that we think that we need to work on. And we also like to offer advice on how to cope in healthier ways and stick to the truth when educating youth about the long-term and sometimes fatal affects drugs and alcohol can have on your body.



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**Christin D'Ovidio:** The pandemic has put a lot of extra stress on everyone and it made everything in schools different. And so, we've been seeing that people are dealing with stress in different ways. What are some of those, how to manage stress and talk with other people, messages that you create? Can you talk a little more about that?

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah. We like to encourage people to have healthier coping strategies. Throughout the pandemic, people have relied a lot on drugs and alcohol and other unhealthier and very dangerous strategies. And we like to promote things like doing things socially out with your friends, and going on walks, and listening to music, and petting your dog or doing things that just make you happy. And we really like to promote that as much as we can on our social media sites, just anything we can do to help the people struggling and give them advice on healthy ways to cope as best we can.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great. Thank you. Jacob, I'm going to ask you the same question. I know everyone has a different role in the team. What is your part in helping address the root causes of underage use or substance misuse in general?

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yeah, of course. So, I just think that collectively, first off, all of us GYAC members are knowledgeable about peer pressure in particular, which is definitely an important thing to bring up, since we have witnessed firsthand a lot of different youth using various substances and trying to convince others to join them, especially in a school environment.

**Jacob Lebroda:** And on the other hand, just for some of my personal involvement with the Governor's Youth Advisory Council, I am a member of our social media committee that Hailey does run. And essentially we just make lots of informative posts as she was already starting, recognizing the various different types of drugs, which is what we are currently doing. And just allowing people to understand what some of the side effects may be from drugs and how they can help out peers with various resources. So, I do really love taking part in that social media campaign, through our nh.gyac account on Instagram. And in addition to that, another one of my roles as a member of the Governor's Youth Advisory Council is to be our governor's council liaison to the partnership. So, what I do with that is I meet up with a variety of different people, including one of our other members. And essentially, what we do on that is just try to find ways to mutually benefit both this amazing group, the partnership, and the Governor's Youth Advisory Council.

**Jacob Lebroda:** We have created a combined, shared Instagram account, and we have currently just jump-started that process recently and are trying to create even more informative posts for various youth to see. So, essentially, if that's not clear enough, I just really like to be involved with the online marketing aspects of what the council has to offer, which is why I take part in social media opportunities and the partnership collaboration.

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**Christin D'Ovidio:** I think that's great. I think you're going to keep finding that organizations and people working in prevention want your voices, they want your opinion, and they want to bring you in, because it's important. And you have a lot of great things to say, and you have a perspective, just like you were saying, both of you have been saying, that people don't have when they're outside of you and your circle. So, thank you. Hailey, can you tell me maybe another activity that the Governor's Youth Advisory Council is working on to spread information and reach young adults and youth?

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah, of course. So, last year a few of the seniors had come up with this idea for a spotlight group. So, basically what this includes is a Google Form where somebody can nominate somebody else, anybody from grades nine through 12. So, they on the Google Form, can explain what that person has been doing in their community that relates to substance misuse and prevention, as well as other accomplishments they have and things like that. Just stating why they should be in the spotlight. At the end of the month or whenever the spotlight group reviews all the forms, we decide who should be spotlighted and then choose one individual grade nine or 10, and then one individual grade 11 or 12. This we hope to be running in the spring or sometime in the next few months, but yes, we would love to get that running and that's something that we definitely want to get at there.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** So, that's great. Are you going to be coordinating through all the schools? Do all schools have the opportunity to participate and have students nominate other youth?

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah, they do. What we plan to hopefully want to do is reach out to all the guidance counselors and other organizations in our communities and just be like, "Hey, do you know anybody that should be getting a spotlight or is deserving of the spotlight and certificate from the governor?" And then basically if they wish to, they can nominate these people that they have. Or, we plan on putting this on our Instagram and getting it out there in that way too. And like Jacob said, we can repost and hopefully our followers can repost or interact with it, or nominate people if they so choose.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's amazing. I know that most people are going to want to help you spread that message, because what a great way to recognize young people that are doing great things. Jacob, I think I'd like to ask you that question. What are some of the other activities that the council's doing?

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yeah, great question. So, I also am on two other groups, including the recruitment committee and in addition to that, the booth committee. And so, what we are trying to do with the booth committee is just increase our overall presence at in-person events and just try to find local activities that are occurring around the State of New Hampshire that we can create booths at and hopefully advertise the Governor's Youth Advisory Council to an even broader audience all around New Hampshire.

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**Jacob Lebroda:** And in addition to that, I also do involve myself in our recruitment committee and what we are trying to do, and that is promote our council to eligible members who could potentially apply to serve on the Governor's Youth Advisory Council. We are primarily looking for people who live in the Northern regions of New Hampshire since our council is currently dominated by those who live in the Southern areas of New Hampshire. And in addition to that, we are trying to pick people who are underclassmen in their high schools and have the potential to serve multiple years on the council. Since, once they get on the council for the first time, they don't have to rerun after that process. So, essentially based on that, I just work with recruitment to ensure that all of the different students at schools are aware of the Governor's Youth Advisory Council and know what they could get themselves into if they do really desire to take their substance prevention advocacy efforts to the state level.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** So, what if youth are interested in this, but they haven't become involved in substance use prevention and how do they get a hold of you?

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yeah, so that's definitely bit of a thing that we have been trying to work on. So, we just think that by us members reposting all of the content on our nh.gyac Instagram account onto our personal accounts, that we'd be able to work on connecting all of our information to a variety of kids across the state. And in addition to this, anyone is able to attend our meetings on the third Saturday of every month, just because they are public.

**Jacob Lebroda:** So, if a student is interested in joining, but doesn't necessarily know about what the council entails or doesn't even have that much experience with previous substance prevention advocacy efforts, then they can totally just come into one of our meetings at the State House and listen in to what we discuss. And if they are interested in joining, they can reach out to Eliza and hopefully fill out an application. Additionally, since we are not currently at our 21 member maximum, we definitely could accept more applications. So, those who are interested will be made aware by their schools or just attending a meeting, like I already stated.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great. So, the commitment is once a month.

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yes.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** And like side committees, side activities?

**Jacob Lebroda:** Yes, exactly. So, just the third Saturday of every month, all of us GYAC kids go to the State House in Concord to meet up just for two hours, to talk about all of the different things that us subcommittees have been working on, since we do meet on our own outside of the meetings.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** I gotcha. So, it's in-person at the State House and then virtually.



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**Jacob Lebroda:** Yes, it is in person, but something important to bring up as well, thank you for mentioning that, because it just reminded me, is that we do have the opportunity for some people to join virtually. We have this thing called a quorum, which is where a certain number of people have to attend the governor's council meetings in person. However, if we do reach that minimum value of members, then we are also able to have remote people join our meetings if they cannot attend in person. However, it's very important to mention that there does have to be that minimum threshold of in-person attendees in order for the meeting to happen and allow remote people to join. However, we do think that that fact could potentially help us obtain more members from Northern regions or just people who have a longer commute anyways, since they do have that option of joining remote.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great. So, Hailey, what are some other things that you're working on right now with the Governor's Youth Advisory Council?

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah, specifically we want to show and highlight where these physical resources are for the kids that need this help in New Hampshire. So, a few of us on the subcommittee are trying to make almost a map of all of the doorways, like the places where you can get help in New Hampshire. We want to really tell these teams that we have these resources available if they so need it.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** I think that's great. A lot of times the doorways are that hub-and-spoke, kind of a triage center. And I don't think that youth are getting the information about what they can access there. So, I think that's really great that you're doing that.

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah. And I think it'll really bring light to the fact that there are places if these people really need it, if they so choose to get the help that they may need. And I think that even if it's only 150 followers or not as many people are looking at it as we want, we think that it's better than nothing and that I could really make a difference if somebody scrolls past and just sees a location that's near them somehow.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great. Eliza, what are some other things that the council traditionally works on?

**Eliza Zarka:** The council, like I mentioned before, they are tasked with anything ranging from educating other youth to advising the governor. And I think Jacob may speak to this a little bit later, but the annual report that they produce is an opportunity for them to provide direct recommendations to the governor.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** Oh, can you tell me about this report, Jacob?

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**Jacob Lebroda:** Yeah, definitely. So, essentially what we have been doing with the annual report is just that there have been a few of the council members taking the initiative to write out a bit of a summary of what we have been doing during this year of operation with the Governor's Youth Advisory Council. And so, we highlighted upon all of the different activities we've been talking about throughout this podcast. And in addition to that, we are able to make direct recommendations to the governor and hopefully receive his approval and implementation into the State of New Hampshire. And so, we've been actively working through every meeting to plan out what we want to tell the governor. And then, eventually we will present this at the end of the year to him, in person.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great.

**Eliza Zarka:** Speaking of the report, I actually had a cool little story about it. The GYAC was presenting their annual report to the governor and he posted the question, "Well, if I gave you \$2 million, could you tell me how to spend it?" And they were like, "Yeah. Yeah." Just thinking he was saying that as a hypothetical. And he says, "All right," this was on a Thursday, he said, "by Monday, can you tell me how to spend \$2 million? I'm serious." So, it was \$2 million of CARES Act money.

**Eliza Zarka:** And the members got together for a special meeting to figure out youth serving organizations that they thought would be helpful throughout COVID through that CARES Act funding. And I've seen adults take six months to figure out what to do with a few million. So, this was high school age students telling the governor, "If you're going to give us two million in CARES Act funding, we think these are the organizations that will serve youth adequately in regards to substance misuse and prevention."

**Eliza Zarka:** So, he looked at the list that they provided and gave all of those organizations the opportunity to apply for that \$2 million. I just like telling that story because it really is putting your money where your mouth is, that he certainly cares about the youth perspective, because they're the ones who are experiencing things and know which organizations are helping them and how to help other youth.

**Christin D'Ovidio:** That's great. It's just so important that people are involved, young people are involved and that someone's listening, but a lot of people are listening and you can really tell. And the work you're doing is just so wonderful. I really want to thank you all for coming on the show today and I can't wait to share this with everyone so that they can learn about the work you're doing.

**Jacob Lebroda:** Thank you so much.

**Hailey Dubois:** Yeah. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you letting us come on to this. It was really great. Thank you so much.

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**Eliza Zarka:** Thank you so much. I just want to throw out that I'm so proud of these members and they really are doing a lot. And I think sometimes they undersell themselves on how much they're doing to make sure that their peers are being heard, the youth voice is being heard. And I just want to also throw out that I'm very excited to continue with the collaboration, with the partnership. So, thank you very much.