



Reaching Out to Russia's Youth

Partners in Dubna and La Crosse Develop Successful Prevention Strategies to Fight Substance Abuse

BY BARBARA J. PRETASKY AND SANDRA J. MCCORMICK

On August 5, 1990, two communities halfway around the world from each other initiated a Sister Cities relationship that would ultimately foster and contribute to the success of an AIHA healthcare partnership. What has happened between these Sister Cities is nothing short of astonishing. It is estimated that there have been more than 550 trips between colleagues in Dubna, Russia and La Crosse, Wisconsin, creating a strong bond between individuals, families, and communities. Additionally, more than 5,000 individuals have contributed to this relationship, providing badly needed resources, hosting guests, and supplying transportation.

In 1992, Dubna and La Crosse furthered their commitment to each other when institutions in the two cities signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing them as AIHA partners. In response to the startling rise in Russian mortality over the past decade, the goal of the partnership was to improve the overall health status of individuals in Dubna where, for example, as in all of Russia, male life expectancy is 57 years, compared to 72 years for American men.¹ Many factors, such as economic and social instability, high rates of tobacco and alcohol consumption, poor nutrition, depression, murder, suicide, and the general deterioration of the Russian healthcare system, appear to be simultaneously contributing to the poor health of Dubna's citizens and low life expectancy figures.

A major focus of the Dubna/La Crosse partnership is addressing the health status of Dubna's youth. Extensive collaboration between US and Russian colleagues has resulted in the initiation of numerous prevention strategies aimed at Dubna's younger population. Special emphasis has been placed on the detection, prevention, and treatment of individuals who suffer from addictions to alcohol and drugs. The "Rebirth" Narcological Center in Dubna, in cooperation with a Prevention Task Force in La Crosse, has developed effective assessment, development, implementation, and replication strategies to fight the high incidence of substance abuse among Dubna's youngest citizens.

Program Development

In 1997, a survey was conducted to determine the self-reported use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs among Dubna boys ages 11–17 and girls ages 10–17 (see Fig. 1). A multi-disciplinary task force comprised of Rebirth Center staff, Dubna's Prosecutor, a student from each Dubna high school, and representatives from the police department and media reviewed and discussed the findings. Based on the high incidence of drug and alcohol use and abuse evident from the report, five community prevention strategies were identified and a model for implementation was developed. The strategies included

- disseminating educational information to youth;
- instituting prevention education in Dubna schools;
- providing healthy, alternative social activities;

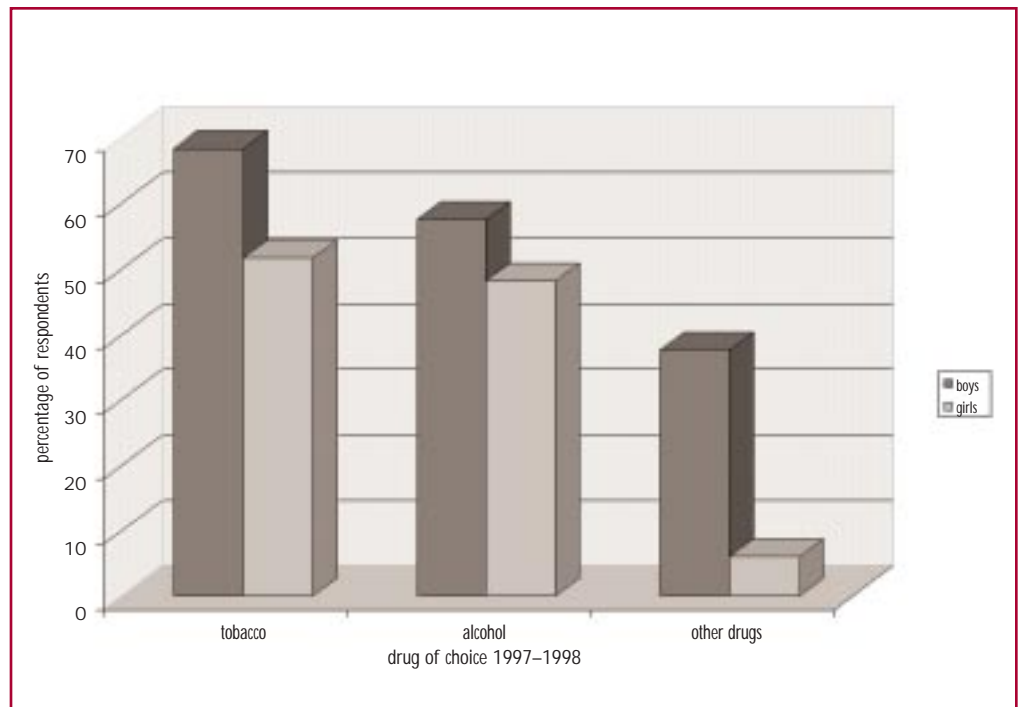


Figure 1. Substance abuse among Dubna boys and girls.

- learning to identify problems and offer referrals; and
- creating community-based processes for prevention and treatment.

Figure 2 illustrates this model, emphasizing the combination of community-based strategies.

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Information Dissemination

Two principal factors contribute to high alcohol use among Dubna’s youth: an increasing proportion of alcohol is produced at home, making it readily available to youngsters, and the price of alcohol has risen considerably less than other consumer items since 1990, making it more affordable to young people.² To educate the community and aid in the dissemination of consistent, accurate information, detailed data concerning the physical and psychological effects of alcohol and drug use and abuse were gathered and reviewed by school psychologists and Rebirth Center staff, who used the information to institute proactive prevention measures. During an 18-month period, 28 articles addressing drug abuse prevention among youth appeared in local Dubna newspapers; four informative radio programs focused on preventing youth alcoholism; four radio “hot line” call-in programs addressed drug abuse prevention among youth; and four informational television programs included prevention as the major topic.

Written materials have also been distributed to young people throughout the city, including 500 copies each of 12 different booklets on subjects ranging from the physical effects of cigarette smoking to drug use alternatives and alcoholism prevention. Additionally, more than 160 lectures and presentations to more than 6,400 young participants have taken place in Dubna since the community survey. Educators and counselors have addressed such topics as “Building Community Assets in Youth,” “Don’t Go up in Smoke,” “Teen Hotline,” “Conflictology Training and Recruitment,” “Alcohol and Alcoholism,” “Drug Use and Abuse,” and “Smoking: A Choice.”

Further efforts include a community-wide program held in Zaprudnya, a Dubna suburb, which helped promote the community’s task force goals. For example, “Rock Against Drugs,” a drug-free concert held to promote healthy alternatives for youth,

attracted more than 200 participants, making this first regional community youth event a huge success.

Prevention Education

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Continuing education seminars for teachers, psychologists, and social workers in schools in Dubna and nearby Dmitrov are hosted monthly by Rebirth Center staff. Each month, 40–50 individuals learn more about how to reach out to young people by using prevention methods, social pedagogy, conflictology, drug abuse prevention, and the promotion of alternative activities. La Crosse prevention specialists have held training sessions on assessment and supervision with their Dubna colleagues via videoconferences.

Prevention topics have also been incorporated into the curriculum of the recently established University of Dubna Social Work Department. “Social Pedagogy” and “Introduction to the Profession of Social Work” are courses that devote a combined total of 40 hours to prevention education for social workers.

Healthy lifestyle education courses are now a part of the standard curriculum at two Dubna secondary schools. These courses consist of 34 lessons that address chemical dependency prevention, healthy alternatives, peer counseling techniques, and the development of self-esteem. English teachers also give their students assignments such as translating texts and brochures on topics such as the effects of drug and tobacco use, healthy alternatives, and the importance of self-esteem.

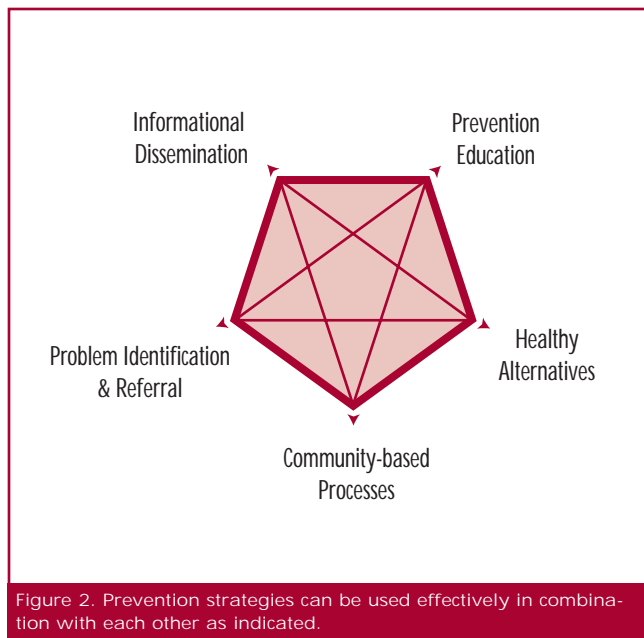


Figure 2. Prevention strategies can be used effectively in combination with each other as indicated.



Providing Alternatives

More than 25,000 young people (ages 8–17) live in Dubna. These children and teenagers attend a variety of schools and universities. Approximately 8,000 students participate in after-school clubs that offer activities in sports, music, and the arts. This high participation rate suggests that after-school programs—particularly those that emphasize the arts—can successfully provide productive alternatives to substance use.

Dubna prevention specialists have successfully used after-school programs as vehicles for information dissemination. The Rebirth Center employs eight teenagers trained in conflict

alcohol and drug use, relationships with their peers or parents, or any other issue troubling them. The service was initiated in February 1998, operating four hours a week. Since then, it has responded to high demand by expanding its operation time to 39 hours a week, with additional hours planned for the near future. The ultimate goal is a 24-hour hot line service.

Trained teenagers receive incoming calls, with counselors specializing in social work and/or psychology available for guidance and backup. Teens aged 13–17 are the most frequent users of the hot line (80% of callers), although parents also call in with questions and concerns about their children. The majority of calls concern conflicts with parents or peers (75%), parents' communication problems with their children (20%), and patients seeking referrals for help with substance abuse issues (5%).

The hot line makes individual referrals to a variety of resources depending on the callers' needs, including the Rebirth Center, physicians, school counselors, hospitals and polyclinics, or parents. Hot line staff track the number and types of calls received in order to best respond to community needs.

The "Trust Phone" has achieved visibility in Dubna through advertisements placed in schools, at meetings and seminars for parents and youth, and on well-placed bulletin boards and bus



Photo: ALHA archives.

Oksana Strelets of Klin and Ludmila Suchkova of Zaprudnya in front of their display at an international alcohol prevention conference.

resolution who work with their peers to educate them about and help them solve problems concerning drug use, peer pressure, and smoking. They also serve as empathetic listeners and helpful referral sources in times of need. More than 30 additional teenagers also work at the Center as volunteers, assisting their peers with substance abuse issues. They disseminate literature, conduct peer education programs in elementary schools, and assist Rebirth Center staff in developing and implementing specific prevention programs.

Problem Identification and Referral

Identifying and referring individuals in need of assistance for problems arising from alcohol use and abuse are major goals of the partnership's youth-directed efforts. A confidential teen hot line called the "Trust Phone" has been established within Dubna's Rebirth Center for this purpose. The hot line is a resource that teenagers can call anonymously with their concerns about

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station boards. Television public service announcements and other mass media outlets have also helped spread the word.

In addition to the hot line, the partnership has established two Alcoholics Anonymous groups that meet three times a week and boast a consistent participation rate of 30 individuals at each gathering. Two Alanon groups for family members and friends of alcoholics have 25 members and meet twice a week to gain support and share their experiences. Teenagers may participate in either group and also have the option of attending an "at risk" prevention group.

Continuing Prevention and Treatment Efforts

The Rebirth Center has established cooperative relationships with more than 25 Russian governmental and non-

governmental organizations in Dubna, Moscow, Zaprudnya, Dmitrov, Taldom, and Klin. This cooperation has facilitated a network of activists and professionals who regularly exchange ideas, resources, expertise, and work to ensure the continued success of the partnership's anti-drug efforts.

As a result of prevention seminars organized by La Crosse and Dubna partners, an industry-based Employee Assistance Program (EAP) will be initiated this year to help assess and support employees dealing with substance abuse and other personal concerns. Key Russian enterprise leaders attending seminars on the benefits of proactive prevention learned how such services could benefit both their employees and company, and have been supportive of the EAP's establishment.

Also, as a result of prevention education initiated by the La Crosse partners, Dubna's police officers have been trained in

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the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program (D.A.R.E.) and the Gang Resistance Education And Training program (G.R.E.A.T.). Future plans include developing a domestic violence training program for police officers and women's health workers. These community-based support processes have gained momentum over the past four years, resulting in a coordinated, community-wide effort to improve the quality-of-life of Dubna's youth.

Recommendations for Replication

Through their combined efforts, partners in Dubna and La Crosse have gained much insight into what it takes for an effective public health initiative to see results. The following recommendations for programs such as Dubna's anti-drug campaign can serve as replication tips for those wishing to achieve similar results in international partnerships.

- *Gain city administration support at the earliest stages of program implementation.* The support of the Dubna's City Health Administration was especially valuable in initiating and implementing new programs within the community, schools, and after-school programs.

- *Develop an effective program.* Our experience has taught us that an effective program includes the following components: goals, measurable objectives, clearly defined implementation strategies, written operating policies and procedures, and the ability to ensure confidentiality.
- *Use the media to promote new programs.* Dubna's local media has been remarkably cooperative in publishing articles that promote community services such as D.A.R.E. and the "Trust Phone." Health professionals have regularly volunteered to contribute articles to local publications on substance abuse prevention, tobacco cessation, proper nutrition, and community referrals.
- *Document early successes.* Dubna's success stories that resulted from program efforts were recorded and published in local media sources; successful clients called radio shows to share their stories; and families discussed their experiences on local television shows. This publicity was an enormous boost to program attendance and participation.
- *Begin slowly.* Limited financial resources allowed the Dubna hot line to operate only four hours a week at its inception. When demand made the service a priority, funds were made available to expand operation to 39 hours a week. Demonstrating the effectiveness of an experimental program is often the key to procuring the resources needed to expand it. By enlisting the assistance of numerous community resources and then capitalizing on the strength of those resources, partners were able to launch an effective effort that was not confined to one specific strategy. The coordinated, orchestrated response by the Dubna/La Crosse partners made possible an increased awareness of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse and established support structures to help those in need. Dubna and La Crosse's longstanding Sister Cities relationship helped lay the groundwork for the multiple successful affiliations that brought together political, academic, and media colleagues to combat a common problem. Their collective success is a testament to the power of teamwork—an essential tenet of all AIHA partnerships.

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