



Rhinelanders Police Department

Lloyd J. Gauthier
Chief of Police

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Contact: Jennifer Chiamulera, Oneida County Health Department, 715-369-6186

Dear Editor,

I would like to discuss effective alternatives to possession, use, and purchase policies that target and penalize youth for possessing, using, or purchasing tobacco products and the importance of comprehensive tobacco prevention and control programs that promote a more supportive approach.

I have been a Law Enforcement officer, a policeman, for 17 years. At the beginning of my career I believed that punitive punishment would motivate someone to change. Arrest more, issue more citations and someone will become sober. I didn't understand recidivism, why a person would continue to make harmful choices over and over again. Roughly 6 years ago I started to realize that the community could never arrest their way out of the substance use disorder epidemic. It became apparent that a more supportive approach could be successful. In October 2016, I responded to a burglary complaint involving stolen medications. The suspect was a 35-year-old mother of 2, 5-time convicted felon, and struggling drug addict begging for another chance to prove she could change. This was a song and dance I had seen hundreds of times in my career, but something about the situation told me to try something different. Through my discretion, I decided to hold off on citation and arrest and encourage her to seek help for her addiction, giving her a chance to make a change. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I definitely wasn't expecting her to go on a 6-year run with no criminal charges, like she now has. Through consistent, active efforts to make contact with her, trust was built. After a time of no criminal activity, I received a phone call from her telling me she had messed up and "bought something". She actually came into the police department and turned it in to me without using it. Offering her a safe place to turn in the drugs without fear of punishment supported her charge to sobriety. At first, I had my doubts, but with her I learned that I had been fighting the addict when the focus should have been on fighting the addiction.

I feel fortunate that I work for a department that strives to partner with the community and continuously improve and change to reflect community needs. Over the past 2 years I have had the opportunity to establish a Peer Driven Addiction Assistance Program that utilizes Recovery Coaches to support those with substance use disorders and their family members. Through consistent, and at times, daily contact with those most at risk and impacted by addiction, Law Enforcement has a unique opportunity to make connections between those in need of services and providers.

As I learned this new way to "enforce" laws I realized that many drug addictions start at a young age and I looked for a way to begin working with youth experiencing addiction. As the youth e-cigarette epidemic took hold, I recognized the need to put this same practice into action with our youth. After all, teen tobacco use has been linked to lifelong dependency and an increased risk of addiction to other drugs and alcohol.



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Through a collaboration with the School District of Rhinelanders and Northwoods Tobacco Free Coalition, the district's Tobacco Free School Policy and Procedure was modified to model best practices, including the implementation of the alternative to suspension nicotine intervention program INDEPTH (Intervention for Nicotine Dependence: Education, Prevention, Tobacco and Health). It is important to balance policy with educational opportunities that help teens understand the consequences of lifelong addiction and effective strategies to support cessation. The RPD Peer Driven Addiction Assistance Program was charged with becoming certified instructors for the INDEPTH. After 2 years of working with youth in this program I found their stories to be similar to those I worked with in drug addiction, their struggles were nearly identical to those in the midst of substance misuse. Many of the youth that struggled with nicotine addiction were ashamed and embarrassed of where they were and what they were doing to their health, and they struggled with how to begin to quit. When I'm out in the community I will run into some of the youth I have had in the program and stop and talk to them. I see the excitement in them when I stop to say hi and acknowledge that I, a law enforcement officer, remembers them. I see the look of surprise when I, a law enforcement officer, ask how things are going with them. Many times over I hear the story that they still remember what we talked about in class and I can see the pride as many tell me that they have quit. I become overwhelmed to think that I was able to interject in their lives at such a pivotal time and teach them that they are not alone and they can overcome this addiction. I'm proud of the youth in my community for how they respond to the program implemented at the Rhinelanders School District.

It is important to balance enforcement with educational opportunities. There are effective, community capacity building, alternatives to punitive punishment. Young people are still in the process of learning the skills of resiliency and healthful decision making. The tobacco industry has historically used aggressive tobacco advertising to target certain populations, including youth. It is up to the community to set up an environment that makes all tobacco products less desirable and less accessible.

This is why I do this work. Tobacco is still a problem in Wisconsin.

Thank you for this opportunity to tell my story.

Detective Sergeant Joshua Chiamulera
Rhinelanders Police Department