

**Greater Atlantic Partnership (GAP) Meeting Minutes
February 6, 2024; 10:00am**

Attendance/Sectors & Agencies Represented:

Youth:

Parents: Jessica Rifice (EHC)

Law Enforcement: Ryan Goehringer (Galloway Twp. PD), Frederick Spano (EHT PD)

Govt Agency: Brian Wilson (Atlantic County), Ingrid Nieves-Clark (EHC Councilwoman)

School: Tara O'Keefe (Stockton University)

Youth Service Org:

Healthcare: Amanda Gan (CDC Foundation), Victoria Foley (Helping Hand

Behavioral Health)

Religious/Fraternal Org.:

Business:

Media:

Civic/Volunteer:

Other Org:

Staff: Jennifer Pielhau (Atlantic Prevention Resources), Anna Peterson (Join Together Atlantic County), Nina Sciore (Atlantic Prevention Resources), Bob Zlotnick (Atlantic Prevention Resources), Kathy Harvey (Atlantic Prevention Resources), Gretchen Halfpenny (Atlantic Prevention Resources), Kim Burns (Atlantic Prevention Resources)

Guest/Other:

Everyone introduced themselves and stated their involvement with JTAC/APR

Funding/Creation of GAP:

Jen opened up the meeting with a powerpoint. The powerpoint covered the basics of funding. She explained that JTAC has existed for almost 12 years and was funded mainly by the Drug Free Communities Grant through the CDC.

The purpose of the coalition is to promote positive youth involvement and try to work on addressing local conditions that put youth at risk for substance use and other risky behaviors.

After 10 years of the DFC funding, we cannot apply for the same funding stream. The funding will end this September, but JTAC will not be going away and a sustainability plan has been established for it to continue.

The GAP coalition will work with the same sectors as JTAC, but will be more focused on a couple specific communities in Atlantic County. The JTAC members decided to target Egg Harbor City (EHC), Egg Harbor Township (EHT), Pleasantville, and Galloway. This was determined by statistics shown on the New Jersey School Performance Report, ODMAPS, the Epicenter for Overdose Statistics, NJSAMS Treatment Statistics specific to Atlantic County and the Monitoring the Future Study. We also chose these municipalities based on their support and involvement in JTAC. Although these 4 areas were chosen, we will still be available to support other communities in our county.

Report Findings:

Jen reported that she reviewed the chronic absenteeism and drop out rates in the communities that GAP will serve. Aside from EHT, the rates are higher than the state rates. These are risk factors.

ODMAPS statistics are from police about the number of naloxone deployments, while Epicenter covers local hospitals number of naloxone deployments. Municipal data from ODMAPS and Epicenter show that the 4 towns have high overdose rates.

NJSAMS data shows that Egg Harbor Township, Egg Harbor City, Pleasantville, and Galloway had the highest admissions for substance use disorder treatment.

The Monitoring the Future study identified alcohol, illicit drugs, and marijuana as priorities for us to focus on. JTAC's focus in the past has been on underage drinking, marijuana, and prescription/illicit drugs, so our goals align with the data.

As we move forward to write the targeted grant for this smaller coalition, the Greater Atlantic Partnership (GAP), we want to make sure that we are addressing the local conditions and are addressing the needs that are actually in our community.

Chief Spano noted that the current population of EHT is 48,000.

Underage Drinking:

Jen began the discussion by asking the group about underage drinking. Underage drinking has taken a backseat since marijuana and other new drugs have emerged, but it is still the number one used drug among youth.

Has anyone seen or is anyone aware of underage alcohol use or problems within their own communities? Are there a lot of parties or things happening?

Brian added “availability” in the chat box.

Bob stated that enforcement has changed a lot within the last 5 to 10 years. Mandates have been coming from the state about what police can and can't do, especially about notifying parents.

Chief Spano added that he agrees and when the state legalized marijuana, the officers took a more hands off approach with the fear factor of potentially getting disciplined if they cross the line on interdicting children with alcohol and/or marijuana. Chief added that underage drinking has not been on their radar, but it could be due to the lack of enforcement and lack of active policing.

Bob asked the Chief if they have been processing a lot of underage drinking charges through their municipality.

Chief Spano replied that based on their 24 hour activity, underage drinking is not something that is prevalent for them. There are things related to marijuana that are predominant, but underage drinking is not.

Bob asked if they were getting called to the Joe Canal's in EHT about underage youth trying to buy in the parking lot.

Chief Spano stated that they do not, but through the Cops in Shops initiative, they do occasionally catch underage youth between the ages of 18 and 21, rather than juveniles.

Jessica Rifice stated that from an EHC standpoint as a community member, a big issue is that there are sorority, fraternity and college houses emerging in the town. College students are throwing parties and while they may not be 14 and 15 years old, they are still underaged and

are very open about it. Police are there often and there is public intoxication. There is nobody present to oversee safety since the students are renting the house.

Bob added that we should involve Stockton on that topic.

Gretchen added that she spoke to Tara from Stockton and Tara mentioned that issues are not on campus but, exactly as Jessica said, in the fraternity and sorority houses that are scattered across campus and throughout EHC.

Jessica asked how they could even police that because it is a whole other privately rented home and the owner is getting their money, so they don't care. But it is causing an issue within the town because there are no repercussions.

Bob added that if it was on campus then the Stockton PD could address it.

Brian asked if the houses in EHC are recognized as official fraternities and sororities by the university.

Jessica replied that some of them are, but some are just college students renting houses. The university can discipline them from a fraternity or sorority standpoint, but there are ways around it. Egg Harbor City is not big enough to handle college policing and they go out to EHC because they are easier to deal with than Galloway PD.

Marijuana:

Jen asked to talk about marijuana, which is at the top of everybody's radar since it became legalized.

What problems related to marijuana use are present in our communities?

Chief Spano stated that the THC vape pens are a rising issue in their schools. They are recovering them almost daily.

Bob asked if they are being sent out for testing.

Chief replied that they are not, but if they are suspected of THC then they are brought into the station, but that's it. If it is tobacco related then they are not taken from the school. The PD does have proper warning mechanisms for the youth and notify their parents. Chief added that the odor of marijuana is prevalent at sporting events, etc. in the community. Since the legalization, the PD is "handcuffed" on how to handle marijuana.

Bob added that maybe they could work with Kim Burns to create an outdoor smoking policy to tighten up the regulations that already exist on smoking in fields, playgrounds, ball fields, etc.

Gretchen added that we should also get school perspectives on marijuana and alcohol among youth.

Jen said that she sent it to the SAC list but we will make sure we do a push and maybe do a presentation or get into their SAC meeting.

Gretchen stated that it is not well represented. She attended a SAC meeting and with all the schools in the county, there were few people there. It might be better to try another entity, like a school counselor, principal, or even superintendent to make sure that all the schools in this coalition are represented.

Jen stated that as we grow we hope to involve more people from schools that are specific to the coalition.

Jen added that the PRIDE survey, offered to high schools and 8th graders, surveys youth on the perceptions of substance use by other youth in their communities. We just finished up the PRIDE survey and had 4 schools on board, 2 of which are in our chosen vicinity. Atlantic City HS, Cedar Creek, Absegami, and Oakcrest all did the surveys. Once the survey closes out this week, we will be able to see the data on our youths perceptions of use within our school districts. This will help to inform our activities and programs that we do in our communities.

Illicit Drugs/Opioids:

Jen asked about any problems related to illicit drug or opioid use in our communities.

What problems related to illicit drugs or opioids are in our communities?

Ingrid spoke for EHC and stated that there was an increase for use in adults. Also touching on the marijuana issue, they are getting younger. Ingrid stated that she is on the board for the EHC Crusaders, which is their local youth sports program. They had incidents where there were youth as young as 6th and 7th grade that were using marijuana. Ingrid added that it is more about reaching out to parents as well because it is hard to push prevention and education if there is not the same reinforcement at home. Youths will see their parents smoking or at outdoor events, there is a cloud that surrounds the stands and bleachers and even the kids on the bench. That is something that needs to go to the schools, but more so to the community as well. We need to get back into the "it takes a village" mentality when it comes to dealing with the youth and dealing with communities to get out of the rates that we have with substance use. This issue needs to be reinforced from both sides, not only at school, but also from home.

Jen added that we spoke about how overdose rates were high along the White and Black Horse Pike.

Gretchen wanted to focus on motels within those areas. It has been a point of frustration for Gretchen's group and they haven't been able to make much headway. They have been trying to do more on social media because the motel owners are very reluctant to let them in. Gretchen mentioned having Narcan vending machines available at these locations, but the motel owners are reluctant to do so.

Jessica stated that she doesn't know what the rate is in EHC, but they have the train that runs right through the town and a new wawa. When you're taking a train from AC to Philly, the first clearing/major opening that people see is the open park and brand new wawa. There is already an existing issue with drugs in these areas.

Gretchen added that Wawa parking lots are notorious for substances.

Jess said that EHC is the halfway point from AC and Philly. The number of liquor stores and known drug houses is high.

Gretchen asked what towns have legalized outlets for marijuana. She knows that EHT has some.

Jessica added that EHC has one and will possibly be getting a second one.

Amanda added that although it isn't specific to just Atlantic County, they did a report on tianeptine through the CDC. About 17 of the patients that were exposed to this drug required hospitalization and intubation in the ICU. The product has been recalled, but has also been linked to synthetic cannabinoids.

Brian added that tianeptine is similar to Kratom. They are two separate things but are both being sold over the counter.

Jen stated that the things we will focus on over the course of the grant will change based on what we are seeing in our communities.

Jen added that we are seeing more xylazine, meth and cocaine in our communities. So, when we talk about illicit drugs, it could be whatever is trending at the moment.

Jen asked about hot spots within the community. We already talked about how the train station, the park and the wawa's are hot spots for EHC.

Bob added that the Wawa's in Galloway have been busy.

Jen added that the Wawa's along the White and Black Horse Pike are also busy.

Chief Spano agreed that the pike would be prevalent since many people do not have their own cars. For EHT specifically, the new Egg Harbor Wawa and the Walmart have had a lot of possession arrests in general.

Brian asked about different housing developments like in Heathercroft.

Chief Spano replied that he hasn't been seeing trends where one area has a lot of drug activity. Not to say that it isn't happening, but they would need to run the numbers to get the exact data. Street level arrests are occurring more in open areas.

Brian asked about overdoses and the chief added that overdoses are spread throughout the township.

Chief added that he was on a call with sober living homes through the NJ State Police. In the call they said that efforts seem to be working and that OD deaths are significantly lower than 2022.

Brian stated that we are below our numbers than we were in 2018 and 2019. There were 166 overdoses in Atlantic County for 2023 as of the end of November. There were 255 overdoses in 2022.

Brian added that it may have to do with the availability of Narcan and it being pushed out on so many platforms.

Chief added that it was reflective of the efforts throughout NJ.

Brian stated that NJ is ahead of the curve and leads the way with different initiatives to reduce substance use.

Jen stated that listening to other states speak at the conference in DC, she noticed that they have difficulties getting into communities and NJ is far ahead. So, we have the ability and NJ has the most coalitions that are working to prevent substance use. It is important to get the right people involved so that we can have a bigger impact.

Brian added that we need to stay ahead of it and look at what the drug trends are. Focusing on meth and stimulants is important, We don't want to wait until it gets so bad that we are chasing our tails like with the opioid epidemic.

Chief Spano said he agrees and that for many years it was just heroin and opiates. They are now seeing more crystal meth and cocaine arrests. A couple of years ago, you didn't really hear about cocaine.

Amanda added that Fentanyl laced cocaine is on the rise as well.

Ryan from Galloway stated that cocaine arrests are outpacing their arrests for heroin. They are having a lot of arrests on their White Horse pike corridor.

Brian stated that he has spoken with pharmacists and they noticed an increase in stimulants that are being prescribed to our youth.

Bob added that part of the reason we chose these communities is because of the White Horse Pike corridor.

Members/Community Involvement:

Jen added that this conversation will help to create our logic models for the grant.

Are there any other community partners that we think should be a part of this group or initiative that we can invite to our next meeting? Aside from our Police, municipal leaders and our school districts.

Bob added that we should try the youth sports leagues, like the Pville jokers, the EHT Police Athletic League. We know about communities that have ordinances for smoking on fields, but if cannabis is being used openly then that is an enforcement issue and we can work with police, council members and talk to the actual leagues themselves, the coaches, and get the parents involved.

Brian asked if we reached out to the municipalities that are receiving opioid settlement funding.

Jen said not specifically, but that is a good point to do that.

Brian said that we should touch base with the towns to see what they are doing with that funding and if it is something that we could tie into the GAP.

Grethcne asked about municipal alliance people from those communities as well.

Brian said we should, but it can be hard to get them involved because their main task is to figure out what to do with the funding and in most cases determining how to utilize it and what programs to support. They have been invited to the coalition throughout the years. A lot of them are volunteers and are spread thin, but we could utilize them as we see fit.

Kim stated that for EHT, Dina is part of EHT Rec, so we could accomplish two things. She also stated that wawa has to be aware of the issue, so maybe inviting a corporate wawa or a manager to sit in could be beneficial.

Bob added that Wawa has a regional office for the are so we could try to get someone from corporate to attend.

Kim added that in EHT there are some very large churches and she would like to see some representation for them. Kim said she wouldn't mind working on that outreach.

Jen stated that they will be working on a faith-based outreach, so Kim could work with Nina to set up something for EHT churches.

Chief Spano added that they have a large chaplain program and a lot of the larger faith based institutions are service chaplains for their program. He offered to pass along contact information if needed.

Jess added that somebody from Stockton and maybe ACCC would be helpful. In regards to rental housing, maybe building people in each city, like code enforcement to provide information to owners.

Ingrid added that they are trying to revamp their Coalition for a Safe Community and their coalition has a lot of church leaders involved as well. She suggested that we reach out to Perry Mays who has connections to other faith based organizations and could be instrumental in helping us spread the word and higher participation. Ingrid can email it to us.

Bob stated that he is on that board and can give his information to Jen.

Next steps internally, Jen, Bob and Kathy will work on writing the grant. It has not come out yet, but JTAC ends in September and the new grant application should be coming out before the end of this month and then we have a couple of months to write it in support of our new GAP coalition.

In the meantime we do have coalition involvement agreements (CIA's). We are required to have 12 representatives from 12 different sectors of our community. These CIA's just state that participants will help to support our coalition in the community.

Closing:

We have been joining this meeting with the JTAC meeting.

Our next meeting will be at the next JTAC meeting on Tuesday March 12th in person at the Stockton ETTTC Center at 11am.

Everyone will receive an email invite to that.

Hopefully moving forward we can grow this GAP coalition to what we need and make it successful.

Jen put her email in the chat.

Gretchen stated that for the OFRT meetings, they have two representatives from EHTPD, Heidi Vasquez and Robert Plantella, who was recently assigned, and are always invited to the OFRT

meetings, so she asked if Chief Spano would consider having one of them attend GAP meetings.

Chief Spano said that he would also like to have consistency but when officers are finished with their shift work it can be hard for them to attend events. He would like to see more commitment and stability on their end. Officer Ed Bertino and Rob O'Donoghue were representing EHT PD at JTAC meetings, but they are both no longer with the department, so there is now a void in that department and he needs to find a stable point person. Chief Spano added that he would still like to be involved to show that they are committed to this. In EHT police are present and involved in the schools from a young age. In 4th grade they do the Adopt a Cop program, in 5th grade they have the dare program, they do the read across america program and are continuously involved with their youth. That is the focus and goal of their police department and they are always looking to expand and be involved with the community.

Jen said that we will work on the meeting minutes and they will be sent out to everybody.

We will hopefully have more information, maybe not at the march meeting, but the next one, on timeframes and what we hope to do moving forward. Our discussion today will really help us to move forward and write the grant.