

Characteristics of a Comprehensive Prevention Approach

When prevention programs and practices are planned and implemented in a strategic, coordinated, and comprehensive manner, they can support and reinforce one another and produce stronger health-related outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. In fact, the greatest evidence of effectiveness in addressing substance misuse and related behavioral health problems comes from studies of prevention programs and practices working in concert with one another—making a strong case for taking a comprehensive approach to prevention when and where possible. A comprehensive approach to the prevention of substance misuse and related behavioral health problems comprises multiple programs and practices that:

- **Address different levels of risk**
- **Operate at different levels of influence**
- **Require the support and participation of diverse stakeholders**

Each of these characteristics is described below.

ADDRESSING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF RISK

Community-based efforts to address substance use-related problems are most effective when matched to their audience's level of risk. Prevention programs and practices can be grouped according to three levels of risk: universal, selective, and indicated:

- **Universal** prevention efforts focus on general audiences who have not been identified based on substance use-related risk.
- **Selective** prevention efforts focus on audiences with known risk factors for a substance use-related problem.
- **Indicated** prevention efforts focus on audiences who are already experiencing a substance use-related problem.

A community's comprehensive approach to prevention should include strategies at all three levels. For example, a comprehensive plan for addressing the nonmedical use of prescription drugs among youth might include a school-based substance misuse prevention curriculum for all middle school students (universal), support groups for youth with a family history of

substance misuse disorders (selective), and counseling and referral to other services, as needed, for youth who are currently misusing prescription drugs (indicated).

OPERATING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INFLUENCE

In addition to addressing different levels of risk, the programs and practices that make up a community's comprehensive prevention approach should reduce the specific risk factors and strengthen the specific protective factors that are known to influence a substance use-related problem at the local level. Because these factors operate at different levels of a person's experience (see *Supporting Material: Key Features of Risk and Protective Factors* for more information), so too should the programs and practices selected to address them. Specifically, a community's comprehensive approach should include programs and practices that operate at the individual, relationship, and community levels.

- To reduce risk at the **individual** level, programs and practices would address such factors as a person's knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors related to the substance use-related problem. For example, a school-based curriculum could boost participants' knowledge of the risks and promote accurate perceptions of the harm associated with prescription drug misuse.
- To reduce risk at the **relationship** level, programs and practices would address factors within a person's closest social circle, such as the knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of family members, friends, and trusted service providers. For example, schools might supplement a prevention curriculum for students with a complementary program for parents that increases their understanding of the risks associated with prescription drug misuse and ways to communicate with their children about these risks.
- To reduce risk at the **community** level, programs and practices would address factors within a person's broader social and physical environment, such as substance use-related social norms and access to substances. For example, a community might adopt prescriber and pharmacy guidelines designed to reduce medically inappropriate access to prescription drugs among youth.

REQUIRING SUPPORT AND PARTICIPATION FROM DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

A comprehensive approach to prevention is only possible with the support and participation of a broad range of community stakeholders. Stakeholders who can play an important role in addressing substance-use related problems include those with:

- **Access to and insights about relevant data**—such as public health, health-care, law enforcement, and education professionals
- **Expertise in gathering and using data**—such as research and evaluation professionals.
- **Capacity to raise awareness of prevention needs and build support for efforts to address them**—such as media professionals and public opinion leaders
- **Authority to allocate resources to prevention efforts**—such as government officials, business/organizational leaders, and philanthropic organizations
- **Commitment and connections to focus population members**—such as schools, workplaces, health clinics, community centers, non-profit agencies, and faith-based organizations

Every community will have a unique comprehensive prevention approach because every community has a unique set of prevention priorities and resources. What will be similar across communities is the need for support and participation from diverse stakeholders to fully understand and establish those priorities, determine how best to address them, and leverage the resources required to do so successfully. In addition, the communication channels and working relationships fostered when diverse stakeholders collaborate to address current prevention needs also serve to strengthen their communities' capacity to recognize and respond effectively as those needs evolve over time.