

Poverty can be a risk taken

There's link to behavior, United Way members told

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MERCER COUNTY – Hoping to gain an insight into where problems lie before they surface, United Way planning com-

“That just breaks my heart to think that at that age, someone thinks life is not worth living.”

Sharon Sorg, chairman of the United Way planning committee

mittee members took in information from experts studying cause-and-effect relationships between poverty and a tendency toward at-risk behaviors.

Laura Leskovac, community mobilizer for the Communities that Care, a government program, told board members that 71 percent of high school seniors across the county are drinking alcohol, and 14 percent of seniors are using narcotics at least monthly and 8 percent of those in 12th grade admitted to using bathsalts or synthetic marijuana.

And that's while they are joining gangs, texting and driving, and gambling.

About 50 percent of students in 8th,

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10th and 12th grades admitted to using marijuana.

“It's not at all good news that I'm bringing you. And the reason that cocaine and heroin aren't mentioned aren't because they aren't a concern, but the numbers are very low,” Leskovac said.

The statistics were gathered as part of a study done every other year during a classroom period in each of those grades. Results are evaluated for validity and are spread evenly between males and females, she

said.

“I'd like to ask a thousand questions. But we have to ask what we can in a 35- or 40-minute classroom setting each fall,” she said. The results are voluntary and anonymous, she said.

“The average 14-year-old sends about 3,400 texts a month. And of seniors, more than half admitted to texting while the car was moving,” she said.

“The most common form of gambling among teens in scratch-off tickets. And most often, you see people spending money they don't have on lottery tickets, trying to win big,” Leskovac said.

Leskovac's goal is to find the at-risk behavior of youth and develop programs to change those outcomes. Currently, she

said, the Strengthening Families Program, which is open to any family with at-risk problems regardless of income, has helped about 84 families.

“We take this information to see what kind of prevention we need. Rather than guessing at what our kids are doing, we ask them,” she said.

The Pennsylvania Youth Study also revealed that nearly 22 percent of high school sophomores said they have considered suicide.

Sharon Sorg, chair of the United Way's planning commission, said the agency has already determined that poverty is the issue the agency wants to tackle, but is still looking for a specific and measurable way to invest in something that will ease

poverty and its associated problems.

“That just breaks my heart to think that at that age, someone thinks life is not worth living,” Sorg said.

“We know poverty is our initiative and where we want to focus our donations. We still need a bold goal, something that will impact the most people. It's going to take every one of us to achieve it, to get there.”

Over the last 18 months the committee, composed of local leaders, educators and businessmen, has listened to multiple agencies and organizations who interact directly with those facing poverty, trying to gain an understanding of what they face and how the United Way of Mercer County can help.