

This Spring, “Take 5” and Ensure a Brighter Future

The recent passing of former First Lady Nancy Reagan generated new attention to her leadership in the battle against drug abuse in America.

Over the years much debate has ensued over her role in the “war on drugs” and whether or not true progress was made on her watch and thereafter.

Some historical perspective is in order. I think many Iowans would be stunned to know that in the late 1970’s, 55% of young people in America were considered casual users of drugs. Shortly after coming into the White House Nancy Reagan took a personal interest in the issue and helped usher in an era that focused on preventing drug abuse in America.

Of course the most memorable phrase of the era was “Just Say No,” and parents and families were encouraged by leaders across the country to take an active role in preventing drug abuse in their families.

From 1980-1990, America saw the greatest decline in drug usage among teens in the nation’s history. Despite some brief trends in the other direction, historically drug use and related crime have been on the decline ever since.

Today about 10% of Americans are considered to be current users of illegal drugs. Likewise, fewer young people drink alcohol and even fewer begin smoking than at any time in the past 20 years. This should all be welcome news to those of us who believe fewer drugs on our streets means a healthier and more productive society.

Despite this good news, many people wrongly believe drug control efforts have been a failure, and that we needlessly lock away too many people for casual drug usage. While we clearly have room for improvement, this view too quickly discredits the work done every day by people preventing drug abuse and related crime.

For example, in Iowa we have sent fewer people to prison for drug related charges for three consecutive years. The number of people sent to Iowa prison last year for casual marijuana use? 0. The fact is you have to work pretty hard to end up in Iowa prison. In most drug-related cases people end up there for violating probation or parole, or for trafficking large sums of narcotics.

Correspondingly, an increasing number of Iowans are receiving drug treatment, and more people leaving drug treatment are staying employed six months after completing their programs. In many cases the criminal justice system is the impetus for Iowans being sent to treatment and returning as productive citizens.

In Iowa counties where anti-drug task forces are in operation, admissions to drug treatment centers are higher. Additionally, these task forces are responsible for rescuing many neglected children. Last year alone over 400 children who were abused or neglected due to drug usage in the home were referred for

services. Without law enforcement officers on the ground doing their jobs, in most cases these kids would never receive the help they need.

Certainly we face big challenges. Iowa, like other states, faces a major threat from prescription drug abuse and the resurgence of heroin. Despite gains, too few people have access to quality drug treatment programs.

In Iowa, fewer young people see marijuana as a dangerous drug and therefore are more likely to experiment with it. This should not be taken lightly.

Nationwide about five million people in the past decade have become regular marijuana users. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports over 70% of young people who became regular drug users started with marijuana.

It's quite tempting for those without all the facts to simply say we have failed, and decide to let up. But to me, doing so would mean letting down far too many people. In particular, our youth, those with mental health problems, and others faced with generational poverty.

While we clearly have work to do, it is worth noting all the success achieved by Iowans working every day to prevent drug abuse, and helping those who are addicted. Our state and nation are safer, healthier places because they haven't given up.

We shouldn't either. Spring is set aside each year as a time to "Take 5." Taking five minutes to talk with your kids or other loved ones about drug abuse can make a world of difference. Some studies suggest having a short, specific talk that reinforces your values and hopes for your children can make it 50% less likely they will ever experiment with drugs.

Visit <http://www.pdfinfo> for more information and resources that can help you have the talk. This simple act can go a long way to helping our next generation be as drug free as possible.

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