Smart Investment: Costs and Benefits of Substance Use Prevention and Behavioral Health Promotion

We can improve the lives of young people, their families, and communities – and save money – by investing in effective prevention.

Why It Matters

Every year, early substance use and mental health problems affect far too many people younger than age 21 in Washington State.¹

These problems have a human toll in pain and suffering, and school, work, and leisure time lost to treatment services. They also have a statewide financial toll.

Treatment costs alone cost Washington State $415,370,973 each year.ii Juvenile justice costs $2,756,887,000.iii

These costs can be reduced if greater investments are made ‘up stream’ in effective and cost-beneficial prevention programs that keep young people healthy and away from choices that may lead to harms.

Substance use and mental health problems in Washington’s young people can be reduced through high-quality delivery of effective prevention programs and policies.

More than 70 prevention programs have been shown in high-quality research studies to reduce problems like substance use and mental health problems and to improve wellbeing.iv

These programs can be offered to children, youth, and families in schools, community agencies, primary care, and other community-wide settings where they live, work, and play.

In the past month, 1 in 5 high school students:
- Drank alcohol
- Used e-cigarette or vaping products

2 in 5 tenth-graders felt so sad or hopeless that they stopped doing their usual activities

Source: 2018 Healthy Youth Survey data

This brief was a cooperative effort between members of the Prevention Research Sub-Committee, University of Washington Social Development Research Group, the WSU IMPACT Research Lab and the Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery.
Many effective programs are good economic investments for Washington State

Benefit-cost analyses by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy show that many effective prevention programs produce economic benefits to Washington State that exceed the costs of offering them. vii

Short-term savings from:
- fewer discipline referrals & suspensions
- better grade retention
- less involvement in juvenile justice, behavioral/mental health & ER services

Types of longer-term benefits:
- increased employment and earnings
- reduced healthcare/public system costs

In SFY 18 and SFY 19, we estimate that our investments in these evidence-based programs led to more than $124 million in benefits to society.

Notes: Net Present Value (NPV) shows how much benefits exceed program costs per participant. Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) shows the return per $1 invested per participant. Estimates are from wsipp.wa.gov.

What Can Washington State Officials Do?

Dedicate funds to support proven-effective prevention

- When the state used tobacco tax revenues and Medicare Set-Aside (MSA) funds to support a comprehensive prevention, treatment, and control program, the state realized more than a $5 to $1 return on investment. viii
- Partner with the prevention community to identify a short list of proven programs to support with dedicated state and federal funding streams.

Support high quality implementation of proven prevention programs

- Support effective program training and implementation.
- Partner with the Washington State prevention community to establish appropriate evidence-based resources for the state.

Fund prevention programs in Washington’s most vulnerable communities to increase equity and reduce health disparities

- Work with Washington’s HCA and Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery to identify communities most in need of support for prevention programming through validated state youth and young surveys measuring health risk behaviors.

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