

Title: Youth-Led Town Hall Challenges Substance Misuse Stigma and Misinformation

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Combating harmful social norms related to the development of adolescent substance misuse is a challenging, yet necessary task, that Youth Leaders from the [Live Well San Diego's Youth Sector](#) have addressed.

After discovering that overdose deaths of teens ages 14–18 years increased 94% from 2019 to 2020 and then another 20% in 2021, Youth Leaders decided to organize a youth-led town hall meeting dedicated to 1) discussing behavioral health education in San Diego schools, 2) clarifying misinformation surrounding substance misuse, 3) and elevating local youth voice. The town hall occurred on December 10th, 2022, at Mira Mesa Public Library, in partnership with County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services. *Live Well San Diego* strives for a healthy, safe, and thriving community. The town hall supported that mission by addressing a prominent issue that kills thousands of teens each year.

The fentanyl crisis is responsible for nearly 25% of teen overdose deaths, disguising itself as counterfeit pills or appearing as candy to an unsuspecting eye. In order to adequately prepare youth against this lethal problem, the town hall featured a panel of subject-matter experts who are *Live Well San Diego* partners. [SAY San Diego](#) and [Project A.W.A.R.E.](#), are diverse non-profit organizations that both support youth populations and families through numerous issues, one being substance misuse. The partners offered new perspectives to town hall attendees, clarified drug facts, and most importantly, provided a Naloxone training. Naloxone rapidly reverses an opioid overdose, and now the youth who attended the town hall are equipped with the tools needed to save a life.

Education is a major component of maintaining a sober and healthy adolescence. When a school lacks an engaging and informative behavioral health curriculum, students' lives and wellbeing are put at-risk. Youth Leaders asked youth if they were satisfied with how their schools approached drug education through a "common ground" activity. When the statement, "Schools do enough to support students who are struggling with substance misuse and addiction," was presented to the attendees, the unanimous decision by youth was: "no, schools *do not* do enough." An attendee expressed that, "the school-to-prison pipeline... is very real, and there needs to be more education, awareness, and actual support." Youth were able to express their concerns regarding addiction in a safe, accepting environment, while also offering new ways to approach the problem.

Unfortunately, many teens are shamed for speaking out against substance misuse; if they inform an adult, they are a "snitch", or if they decide to live a sober life, they are boring. One attendee commented, "I think a lot of people are afraid to have these conversations due to the stigma surrounding them." Youth Leaders, as well as their peers, were tired of this forced silence and represented other teens who felt like their voices were not being heard.

The Youth Leaders and their community partners want to emphasize that every individual in San Diego County deserves to live a happy and healthy life. By overcoming the stigma surrounding substance misuse, as well as embracing the benefits of recovery resources, youth will gain a brighter future.

VIDEO: [Youth-Led Town Hall - Substance Misuse – Dec 2022](#)

To learn more about the *Live Well San Diego* Youth Sector visit LiveWellSD.org/youth.

For any questions please contact LiveWellYouth@sdcounty.ca.gov.