

PRESS RELEASE

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Can we vaccinate against addiction and mental illness?

This was the question posed by the Special Legislative Commission on Behavioral Health Promotion and Upstream Prevention during its second official meeting, "The Promise and Science of Prevention", this month in Boston.

Although the "behavioral health vaccine" wouldn't be an injection, the answer was a resounding "yes" from the giants of prevention science who presented to the Commission. The vaccines will come in the form of school-, home- and community-based prevention programs designed to diminish the risks a person will develop an illness or addiction disorder.

The Commission meeting, attended by House Speaker Robert DeLeo, featured National Academy of Medicine prevention scientists, Dr. William Beardslee of Harvard University, Dr. Laurel Leslie of Tufts University, Dr. Jeff Jenson of University of Denver, and Dr. J. David Hawkins of the University of Washington.

The scientists helped author the landmark academy report, "Unleashing the Power of Prevention", which called for investments in programs to prevent mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders that now pose some of the most significant challenges to health in the Nation and the state.

Although Massachusetts ranks #2 among states in overall health, Mass scores in the lower half of the pack on rankings of excessive drinking (#38), violent crime (#33), drug deaths (#31), frequent mental distress (#31), and health disparities (#46).ⁱ

Among the mix of programs presented by the meeting was Life Skills Training, a school-based social and emotional health program that teaches young people social and behavioral skills.ⁱⁱ Dr. Jenson noted that as one of the most well tested programs for preventing substance misuse, life skills training has an estimated \$15 in societal benefits for every \$1 spent.

The group also heard a presentation on the Good Behavior Game (GBG)ⁱⁱⁱ from Dr. Dennis Embry of the PAXIS Institute. In the short term, GBG, a 1st grade classroom intervention, helps teachers manage their classrooms and to promote academic success but over the long term the game protects participants from addictive disorders, suicide, and violent aggression. Like the steep payoffs from other prevention programs, GBG has a return on investment estimated at \$31 in benefits to every \$1 spent.

Those returns are a potential windfall for the state, which is grappling with how to reduce the enormous costs of acute treatment and recovery, including addiction services.

The multidisciplinary “Promote Prevent” Commission is made up of 24 experts and state leaders, including Chief Justice Paula Carey, DPH and DMH Commissioners, the Director of the Health Policy Commission, and representatives from organizations like the Massachusetts Public Health Association and the National Association of Social Workers.

The Commission is chaired by Rep. Jim Cantwell of Marshfield and Sen. Jen Flanagan of Leominster and is tasked with identifying existing programs, as well as policy and systems changes, to prevent behavioral health disorders.

Cantwell said, “The Commissioners and our presenters represent the brightest minds in the public and private sector across key fields—public safety, public health, healthcare, addiction, insurance, and education. They’ve come together around the belief that if we can act early, we can save individuals and families from tragedy and promote a happier and healthier commonwealth.”

The next big question for the commission is how to pay for it all. On June 6th at 1:30PM, the Commission will hold a public meeting, Financing Prevention, at the Health Policy Commission. You can learn more about the Promote Prevent Commission at PromotePrevent.com.

ⁱ Source: America’s Health Rankings, 2016 Annual Report, American Public Health Association, with the United Health Foundation

ⁱⁱ <http://legacy.nreppadmin.net/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=109>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://goodbehaviorgame.air.org/evidence_base.html