

MRP
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GASP program receives \$500,000 federal grant

The Groton Adolescent Substance Abuse Program has just won two major funding grants. The largest was the renewal of a competitive federal award of \$500,000 (\$100,000 a year for five years) for its overall program. The first-year payment of \$100,000 was publicly announced by Rep. Simmons at a ceremony that I attended at Fitch Middle School on Oct. 2.

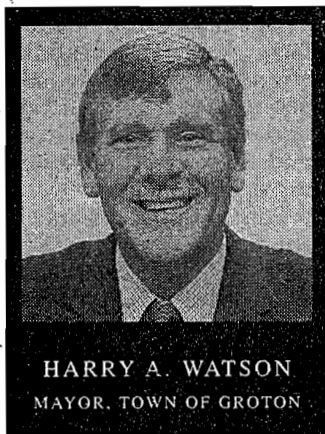
Another grant of \$80,000 a year for three years will allow Groton to carry on a major program to prevent underage drinking. The \$80,000 comes from the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. I have written before about the impressive achievements of our regional Ledge Light Health District. Nowadays, Ledge Light's staff continues to build success upon success.

While most of Ledge Light's programs serve all of its member towns, the entire range of G.A.S.P. activities has been designed and carried out solely for Groton residents, mainly with emphasis on healthy lives for our young people. I think the latest grants of major amounts of outside funding are more evidence of how Groton taxpayers are getting far more in service than expected from our annual contribution to the Health District Budget - it is still less than \$300,000 per year.

GASP is youth-oriented, so Ledge Light has brought in motivational speakers such as former UConn basketball center Kara Wolters. The programs and activities for Groton's young people include referrals to the "Smart Moves" program of the Boys & Girls Club, Groton Maritime Academy, and the ACE (Aviation Career Exploration) which the City of Groton co-sponsors with the Civil Air Patrol.

GASP's accomplishments are already impressive. Through the support of GASP coalition members, the Ledge Light Health District was the source and motivation for two important town ordinances in the past few years. Because of the careful research by GASP, the Town Council agreed in 2001 to enact an ordinance that ended access to tobacco vending machines by children in Groton.

Early this year, Ledge Light made a detailed presentation to the Town Council and RTM resulting in the



HARRY A. WATSON
MAYOR, TOWN OF GROTON

passage of a Town of Groton "Social Host" ordinance that provides for fining adults who serve alcohol to underage people. While there was never an intention for this ordinance to be used to interfere with gatherings in private homes, the police believe such an ordinance helps them to protect children.

At the end of the 2006 session of the State General Assembly, the state passed a similar law. Town Police will now make use of the state law primarily, when they encounter teen-age drinking incidents, but the town ordinance will provide a detailed set of backup rules that may prove to be valuable in protecting our youth from serious mistakes in their activities and in the choices they make.

As Ledge Light and its GASP program have gained experience, they have built up a body of science-based information that guides them to create new programs and adapt existing ones. GASP programs are based on both a wide body of scientific literature in the fields of medicine and psychology and also on questionnaire surveys that Ledge Light has conducted. The fourth survey was done in 2006 to gather information from 600 of our children in 7th to 10th grades. The surveys asked the children not only about their beliefs and behavior but also about what their support structures are.

Cindy Barry, assistant director of LLHD, says that the GASP program means to create a healthy setting in which children make wise decisions and gain the strength to say "no" by constructing a 'domain' for the kids - consisting of their community (as they perceive it), their family, school, self, role models and safe policies that the community provides.

Prior surveys from 2000 and 2004 have been used to reach science-based conclusions on the results of the

first years of GASP.

In 2004, compared to 2000, children who responded were found to have gained a protective factor, and they are less involved with dangerous substances. This is more certain when a child has been involved in two or more healthy programs and activities. Surveys have helped us to find which children are most vulnerable to being led into the wrong choices and behaviors.

Ledge Light Health District looks into programs that have worked in other parts of the USA, and they have a system in which they can submit questions to experts. One of the scientific benefits came from deciding to look at not only which children are vulnerable and susceptible to misuse of substances, but to also take a deep look into all the contributing factors for kids who have not had problems. Learning what their psychological and environmental influences have been gives us an insight into what activities and assistance should be given to other children.

The \$500,000 Federal grant renewal was one of only three in Connecticut, and only 107 such awards were made across the nation. It was the second five-year program financing grant that Ledge Light has received for GASP. Grant money is not by any means the only source of GASP's success. The essence of the program is its coalition of community interests. The coalition that has been formed here is understood to be a major reason why GASP has received major, new and renewed grants. Even more, Groton's Ledge Light Health District is now qualified to be a mentor organization to other towns. They will help Norwich and Waterford to build drug-free communities.

I told you that GASP is a coalition, and I am proud to tell you who makes up the coalition. It includes Groton's Public Schools Library and Parks and Recreation Department, Mayor Popp and the City of Groton, Boys & Girls Club, Child & Family Agency, Mystic Art Center, Women's Center of SECT, St. Andrew's Church - and students, parents and local business leaders.

The findings and recommendations from GASP's 2006 survey will be presented at a public meeting at the Groton Public Library on the evening of Thursday, November 16.