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COMMUNITY NEWS

SAFE coalition aims to break stigmas of drug abuse in Arab families

By Samer Hijazi | Thursday, 04.14.2016, 06:53 PM



Safety, Addiction, Family, Education

Mission Statement: SAFE aims to lead and support the Greater Dearborn community to dispel the myths and stigmas about drug addiction through public education, sharing stories of recovery, partnering with local and state leaders to advocate for our cause, and providing recovery support services for those in need.

DEARBORN — Acknowledging drug abuse in the Arab American community has been a struggle for many local families.

That is why a coalition called SAFE (Safety. Addiction. Family. Education) is being started by four community members, in an effort to shatter the stigmas attached to drug abuse.

Pharmacist Ghada Abdallah, who is also on the Michigan Pharmacists Board; Hassan Abdallah, a senior compliance analyst and law school student; HYPE Athletics founder Ali Sayed and Zainab Jaafar-Chami, a sales manager at a local pharmacy, are leading the efforts to introduce the initiative to the community.

In the last year, a string of drug-related deaths had shaken many Arab households, abruptly thrusting the topic of abuse and addiction into the spotlight.

However, Ghada Abdallah said people still remain hesitant in acknowledging drug abuse. She is aiming to send a message through SAFE that those families aren't alone in the struggle.

"We want people to understand that if you have a child that is a drug addict, it doesn't mean you are a bad parent," the pharmacist said. "I wish I could say I have all the answers, but we have to figure it out as a community."

She said part of the stigma in addressing substance abuse is the public humiliation that the families feel is attached to the issue.

Households remain hesitant to acknowledge such taboo topics because of social aspects tied to the culture. Ultimately, it's the fear of being judged by others.

But Abdallah said the coalition isn't looking to point fingers at anybody. SAFE aims to develop a network of reliable resources that will provide individuals and families with opportunities for counseling, healthcare or even just simple dialogue.

One avenue she said has been tremendous is the involvement of local imams in the Dearborn and Dearborn Heights area who have fully embraced the taboo topic.

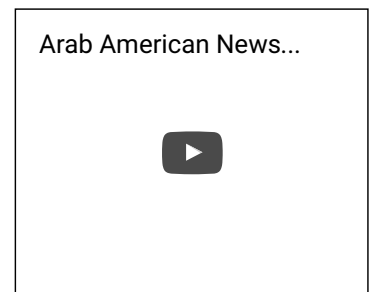
In March, she collaborated with Muslim leaders on an event titled the "Muslim Mental Health Panel" and the Imams have since relayed the information back to their mosques.

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"I really think it struck a chord," the pharmacist said. "The Muslim leaders were presented with the drug problem in a way they could feel it. They brought up very good questions and then went back to their mosques and started mobilizing."

Such topics are now being incorporated weekly in lectures conducted by local religious leaders.

Ghada Abdallah believes, now more than ever, the tides are beginning to shift to allow open discussions in the community.

For Hassan Abdallah, conceiving a coalition of this nature was a necessity.

He said he had witnessed people in his daily life who were struggling with drug abuse.

"Behind this curtain of mental health and substance abuse, there is a mountain of an issue," he said. "It's not something that can be addressed through a few speeches and meetings. The goal was to create a coalition that is sustainable and that can carry out goals for 10-15 years and beyond."

However, the founders of the coalition are aware that half the battle begins with reaching out to the families of those who are habitual drug users. Their efforts aim to educate families on the proper resources available once a loved one has succumbed to drug abuse.

"We knew we couldn't just go and speak to students about preventative drug measures," Hassan said. "We knew that the key party is the family and individuals who sacrifice everything they have."

Ghada said many people believe drug addicts can only receive help when they realize there's an issue themselves and are willing to seek treatment.

But she said this is a myth she's looking to bust. Usually, drug addicts remain in denial as they continue a downward spiral.

In some cases, family members may even end up becoming enablers for the drug abuser.

The pharmacist is encouraging families who have lost loved ones to come forward and share their stories with SAFE.

"Families who are grieving are still sensitive to it," she said. "But I encourage people who have suffered a loss to come forward with their experience so that others can learn from you. If it means saving another person, then we should encourage it."

Following a string of deaths in the Arab community, Ghada Abdallah went on a quest to obtain local data on drug related deaths. She said the numbers she was able to obtain were worrisome.

After connecting with Cynthia Arfken, a professor in the Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neurosciences at Wayne State University, she learned that that in Michigan, drug overdose rates are higher than the national average.

That rate has increased even more for Whites than for African Americans.

Arfken said some deaths in the Arab and Chaldean community were reported for her research, but it was still too little to make a statistical conclusion about the community.

Ghada Abdallah is inviting the community to participate in the upcoming forums. She said part of SAFE's goal will be to identify what professionals can do in their field to help address the issue.

SAFE is also aiming to have local mosques incorporate drug abuse programs during the month of Ramadan.

On Friday, April 8, Hassan Abdallah introduced SAFE during HYPE Athletics' 15th annual dinner, in a room packed with families, community leaders and elected officials.

Over the weekend, the coalition's newly created Facebook page was flooded with messages from community members who expressed interest in participating.

Hassan added that the intention of the coalition is to not publicly humiliate or condemn any families. SAFE is aware that there is sensitivity attached to the discussions.

"There's that negative backlash that makes it seem like we are calling people out," he said. "But our goal is for it to serve as a motivating piece. We want to take the weight off the shoulders of people who feel there is no one there for them to speak to."

SAFE's first public forum is tentatively scheduled for May.

To learn more about SAFE join its Facebook group at: <https://www.facebook.com/safesubstanceabusecoalition/?fref=ts>

By Samer Hijazi

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