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Natalie Ciappa's Law

By Andrew Malekoff

One month ago the Nassau County legislature passed a bill that requires police to notify school districts about heroin arrests. The bill, Natalie Ciappa's Law, is named after a teenaged girl from Long Island, who died of a heroin overdose in June, 2008.

My heart goes out to Natalie's family and to the growing number of families on Long Island that grieve the loss of their children to heroin and other addictions. Having worked in the addictions field for over three decades there are a few simple truths that I have learned. One is that drug addiction is a disease that destroys families. Another is that it doesn't have to.

A Disease Suffered Secretly

Those that are afflicted with heroin addiction and their families have been stigmatized by an unforgiving society that view it not as an illness but as the consequence of a moral failing, lack of will power or poor parenting. Although progress has been made in dispelling such damaging myths, I am afraid that we still have a very long way to go.

Most people with physical illnesses are the beneficiaries of widespread understanding, sympathy and support. Not so with addiction. Can you imagine for a moment lecturing a parent whose child is diagnosed with brain cancer and telling them that if they had enforced an earlier curfew that the cancer could have been prevented. Such is the twisted logic of the self righteous and ignorant who refuse to accept that addiction is a disease that does not discriminate by race, faith, upbringing or privilege.

The stigma of addiction necessitates that it is most often suffered secretly, only deepening the pain for all that care for an addicted child. Public support must replace secret pain; and therein lies the challenge in Natalie Ciappa's Law. With this law comes enormous responsibility. School officials will no longer be able to keep a straight face and say, "There is no drug problem in my school district."

A Call to Action

Will the passing of this law bring with it dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders that will ensure that notification of arrest information will cause no further damage to suffering families? Will the passing of this law protect and prevent others from criminal activity, and also help young people and families to find and get the help that they need?

The answer to these questions is: It depends. It depends what school district leadership does with it. I assure you that it will not be easy. But nothing worth fighting for ever is.

Natalie's Ciappa's Law will shake things up and create dilemmas and concerns among school officials, family members and others. Sometimes it is worth the risk to shake things up in order to make a difference.

Beyond notification, I hope that the law that bears her name will do two things. First, I hope that it will serve to remind all parents that Natalie was not a bad girl. She was a beautiful young woman who suffered from an insidious and progressive disease. In addition to the good that it can do, passing this law is a step towards publicly restoring Natalie's good name and the dignity that she deserves in death. Second, I hope that the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) will provide adequate funding and strong leadership for drug and alcohol treatment for teenagers and their families.

Natalie's Legacy

Finally, although there are those that believe strongly that this new law is flawed, either because it does not go far enough to expose other illegal drug activity or because it goes too far in exposing vulnerable individuals, it is my hope that Natalie Ciappa's Law will be a step forward in the ongoing march to ensure that all our children are healthy and safe.