

## YOUR VOICE

## Preventing addiction lowers government spending

By Adam Brickner

**H**ere's a question almost every politician and government official is asking these days: What is the best way for our nation to progress, in a way that we can all afford?

This question is echoing throughout Greenville, Columbia, Washington, D.C., and most of the town halls of our nation. While there are many ways to get to an answer, many people across the political spectrum are acknowledging that we simply must find ways to lower our government's cost of doing business. But how?

One helpful concept might be this: Whenever we know that spending one dollar now will save several dollars in the near future, we should take that opportunity.

Here's an example, and it's an important one. The cost of addiction in our community is staggering, and it destroys productivity in our economy. In Greenville County alone, more than \$500 million dollars is spent by taxpayers each year on addiction and its broad, damaging

effects. This figure was validated by a Tripp-Umbach Healthcare study in 2002, and includes law enforcement costs related to alcohol and drugs, health-care costs covered by public funds, and costs for other social services related to addiction.

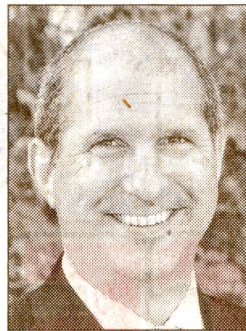
Extrapolate those costs statewide, renew them annually and one begins to get a sense of the sheer weight of the problem. It's a \$1,300 debt for each man, woman and child in Greenville County, every year.

Now, imagine the positive impact on our state fiscal health if we could significantly lower the cost of addiction's impact to our community.

It's not a dream. Good work is happening now to accomplish this goal, but more must be done to create the long-term, positive fiscal impact we all are striving for.

The good work I'm talking about is prevention, and a focus on health promotion and wellness. Simply put, when we spend a dollar to prevent a young person from abusing alcohol or drugs, taxpayers save several dollars

## GUEST COLUMN



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in later costs for criminal justice, health and human services.

How many dollars are saved with prevention, you ask? An independent study by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation has shown that evidence-based prevention programs currently being

used in South Carolina save taxpayers up to \$34 in long-term spending for every dollar spent on implementation. Now that's positive budget impact.

To gain a rate of return of 34 to 1, addiction prevention must be about much more than "Just say no." The most effective and efficient prevention programs accomplish two things. First, they work closely and personally with high-risk teenagers, face to face. Second, effective programs work to reduce youth access to alcohol, by preventing retail stores and others from providing it to teenagers in the first place.

The Phoenix Center of Greenville implements effective prevention programs that focus on both of these best practices. It is some of the most impactful work administered by the Greenville County Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

Highly trained and certified prevention specialists identify teenagers at high-risk of abusing drugs or alcohol, and through the REACH program, they begin long-term relation-

ships that include mentoring, outdoor activities and education on the realities of addiction. The ability to make good decisions is key for teenagers in avoiding addiction, and REACH kids improve their ability to make good decisions by an average of 27 percent, and dramatically decrease their use or likelihood of using drugs or alcohol. It's a program that works for the kids, and delivers long-term positive fiscal return for all of us.

The prevention specialists at The Phoenix Center of Greenville also coordinate Greenville's 13th Judicial Circuit Alcohol Enforcement Team, to make sure teens can't buy alcohol and tobacco at local retail stores. A combination of education and undercover retail checks has delivered stellar results, and a 63 percent drop in the number of retailers caught selling alcohol and tobacco to minors.

What now? We've established that the prevention of addiction in our community can have dramatic effects on our state and local budgets in the long

term. And we've shown that The Phoenix Center of Greenville is implementing two best practices to accomplish that goal.

We need more capacity to do this work. We need to reach more teenagers at risk, more schools, and more families. Here's how you can help.

First, make sure all of the kids in your extended family are loved, supported and aware of the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Second, learn more about prevention efforts in Greenville County, by visiting the website for The Family Effect at [www.familyeffect.org](http://www.familyeffect.org). The Family Effect is a philanthropic and volunteer organization that supports Phoenix Center programs focused on children and families. You can also find The Family Effect on Facebook.

Our nation is beginning to recognize the widespread damage that addiction inflicts on our collective physical and fiscal health. Effective prevention programs offer a long-term, sustainable solution to the problem. Let's do more.