



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

Senator Ortt, Local Representatives Kick Off Red Ribbon Week in Conjunction With Mental Health Awareness

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NIAGARA FALLS – In a joint effort to combat the opioid crisis and raise awareness about the drug abuse issues facing our communities, State Senator Rob Ortt (R-C-I, North Tonawanda), local officials and community organizations today held a local kickoff for the national Red Ribbon Campaign, the oldest and largest drug prevention campaign in the country.

At a drug and alcohol addiction treatment center in Niagara Falls, representatives highlighted the strong connection between drug addiction and mental illness, which are often intertwined.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, many people who are addicted to drugs are also diagnosed with other mental disorders, including anxiety and depression. Some develop mental health problems related to their compulsive drug use, and some take drugs in an attempt to alleviate symptoms of mental health disorders. Whatever symptoms appear first, it is important to treat all mental illnesses at the same time.

Red Ribbon Week takes place every year from October 23-31. The mission of the Red Ribbon Campaign is to present a unified and visible commitment toward the creation of a drug-free America.

Mental Health Senate Committee Chairman and Senate Joint Task Force on Heroin and Opioid Addiction Co-Chair, Senator Ortt said, “Many individuals start using substances as a way to self-medicate feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, PTSD and other mental health diagnoses. The impacts of mental illness and substance abuse are far-reaching, resulting in lives that have been tragically cut short and families that have been torn apart. That’s why public awareness, education and vital resources are critical in breaking the cycle of addiction and curbing the growing epidemic.”

Daniel J. Shubsda, President/CEO, Northpointe Council, Inc. said, “The Red Ribbon Campaign encourages our entire community to adopt healthy drug-free lifestyles. It brings together parents, schools, and businesses as we look for innovative ways to keep kids and communities drug free. Red Ribbon Week serves as a vehicle for communities and individuals to take a stand for the hopes and dreams of our children through a commitment to drug prevention, treatment and recovery.”

Niagara County Director of Mental Health Laura Kelemen said, “A lot of addiction is secondary to mental health disorders. It’s important that our families, community members and peers are educated on recognizing the signs of mental illness and how to address it. The best treatment is prevention.”

Avi Israel’s 20-year-old son Michael committed suicide in June 2011 after struggling with addiction to painkillers. Through his organization, Save the Michaels of the World, Avi has created awareness of prescription drug addiction, overdose and suicide, and has helped to shape legislation into law. I-STOP, or “Internet System for Tracking Over-Prescribing,” was signed into law in 2012.

Save the Michaels of the World, Inc. Pres. Avi Israel said, “We’re in the midst of an epidemic that’s killing more than 120 people each day in the U.S. The best way to fight addiction and save lives is prevention and awareness. As parents, we need to be the first line of defense for our children. There is no pain greater than the pain of losing your child.”

Steve, a Niagara County resident who only wanted to be identified by his first name, is currently recovering from drug addiction.

“I’ve often felt demonized because of my addiction, especially by my family,” said Steve. “My community gave me the strength to seek help. I’m thankful for the methadone program at Northpointe. It’s allowed me to pick up the pieces and get back on my feet. I wouldn’t be where I am today without the support of my community.”

Niagara County Legislator Owen Steed said, “We know there’s a drug epidemic in our area and families are turning to us for help. The issue struck a chord with me after an individual’s family member committed suicide as a result of his despair over addiction and inability to get the right help at the right time. We can do better as a society to prevent addiction, but

need the support of our entire community to ensure our children grow up drug-free.”

Niagara Falls City School District Superintendent Mark Laurie said, “Anything that we can do to promote awareness and education for our students is critical, not only to their social development but also to their academic success. We support every effort to make communities aware of the dangers of drugs, and to provide resources to help families in crisis.”

Individuals who are seeking information and referrals for resources for a variety of concerns, including mental health and substance use can contact Niagara County Department of Mental Health's Crisis Services 24/7/365 at (716) 285-3515.

Additionally, the public is invited to a forum on recognizing the signs of addiction and mental illness. The forum, “Could it be my Child?” will be held on Thursday, October 27 from 5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. at Harry F. Abate School in Niagara Falls. It is free to the public and will include mental health experts, addiction specialists, advocates, and other participants. For more information, call (716) 439-7410.