Experts say drug abuse on the rise in Louisiana

By INES PINTO
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NEW ORLEANS — Drug abuse in Louisiana appears to be on the rise, while drug abusers are getting younger, say state drug-abuse counselors, educators and law-enforcement officials.

Vern Ridgeway of the state's substance-abuse clinic in Baton Rouge said state clinics treat about 36,000 of the 150,000 people in Louisiana needing help for drug abuse. And he estimates that about another 450,000 people in the state using drugs now will need treatment for drug abuse in the future.

“We are running in the top third in the nation of the prevalence of problems,” Ridgeway said. “As of last year, we were 40th in the nation in the allocation for treatment.”

Younger people are coming in to be treated, and the age when kids start using drugs and alcohol is going down, Ridgeway said. Adolescents are starting to use drugs when they are about 12 years old, he said.

“Ten years ago, the mean age for entering was 42 years old, and now it is 30,” he said.

About 15 percent of the people under 19 years old that use drugs will become addicts, said Sonya Dunn of the state Department of Education's Substance Abuse Prevention and Education program.

“We have very little money for drug abuse,” she said of the state’s education budget cuts that have slashed funding for the SAPE program.

SAPE has several counselors that teach students, teachers and administrators around the state about drug prevention. SAPE's curriculum is designed to reach kindergarten through 12th grade, but each school district decides how much it will teach.

Reginald Grace of the Department of Education said St. James Parish and Ascension Parish have adopted mandatory drug testing for athletes in the schools.

The drug problem is “getting better because more people are getting educated about drug and alcohol abuse,” he said.

Lt. Joseph Branham of the New Orleans Police Department said marijuana use is decreasing, which is raising the price of the drug, and cocaine use is on the rise because it has become cheaper, more available and purer.

The drug problem is getting worse in Louisiana because Florida has cracked down on drug smuggling, so dealers and smugglers have been heading for Louisiana, Ridgeway said.

Branham said 798 drug arrests were made in 1967 in New Orleans, and in 1972 there were 4,200 arrests. In 1985, about 3,700 arrests were made.

Maggie Pike of Odyssey House, an inpatient clinic for drug and alcohol abusers in New Orleans, said the availability of drug counseling has been increasing in the last decade, but with the state's escalating financial woes, counseling is decreasing.

Pike said an organization called Mothers Against Drugs in Shreveport has had a successful program in fighting drug abuse. The organization puts on puppet shows with humans as puppets. The puppets complain about how the owner of the body in which they live has mistreated them.

Pike said a problem that has become a trend with substance abusers is cross-addiction, or the abuse of both alcohol and drugs.