

Parents begin nickel campaign to fund addiction fights

Living

cmitchell@courierpostonline.com

Christina Mitchell writes about families in her column Ties That Bind, which appears on Thursdays in the Courier-Post's Living section.

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

The women behind the Parent to Parent Coalition had fourth-row seats for Gov. Jon Corzine's budget talk at Rowan University last week.

Let's just say these are not people you want near the stage when you're crying poor.

Corzine told about 350 people at a town meeting the state's budget has a \$4.5 billion shortfall and that "significant cuts" are in order.

You'll pardon Kathleen Dobbs, Louise Habicht, Kathleen Foster and Joni Whelan if they've heard all this before.

They have.

The advocates of P2P -- some of whom lost their own children to drug overdoses -- have been badgering governors since Christie Whitman to provide more state funding for addiction treatment in South Jersey.

Their latest cause is the Just a Nickel campaign, an attempt to raise funds for addiction treatment by collecting nickels in glass jugs.

The campaign's long-term goal is an increase of 5 cents a gallon in the state's alcohol tax. It has not been raised since 1992.

Having lobbied for years for an adolescent treatment center that finally opened two years ago in Pittsgrove, P2P now wants the revenue from an increased tax -- estimated at \$10 million -- earmarked for addiction programs. The current state outlay for such programs is about \$11 million, minus \$2 million for administrative costs.

It's a drop in the bucket -- or jug, if you will. But P2P figures 3,800 nickels -- or \$190 -- can buy one day of inpatient drug treatment. An additional \$10 million in funds would benefit 3,800 addicts.

"I'm tired of burying people we should be treating," says Whelan, CEO of SODAT (Services to Overcome Drug Abuse Among Teenagers), a nonprofit agency that provides outpatient treatment at six locations in South Jersey.

"We really need to get these jugs filled," says Dobbs, a Barrington resident whose son, Timothy, is "day to day" since an addiction relapse three years ago. "Our phones are ringing off the wall with parents calling.

"And we don't want to depend on legislators."

To date, no state lawmakers officially have endorsed the Just a Nickel campaign and none attended the kickoff news conference in Trenton last month.

But the women of P2P are used to this. So they are taking matters into their own hands: They will use the thousands of nickels they collect to buy short-term treatment for desperate families who reach to them, often as a last resort.

Meanwhile, 10 of the P2P women surrounded the governor after his talk at Rowan last week. They took home no promises.

He took home a jug. Ties That Bind appears Tuesday. Contact Christina Mitchell at (856) 317-7905 or cmitchell@courierpostonline.com.