

# Teen drug use in Denver metro becoming public problem

By Kyle Dyer

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The number of teenagers in the Denver metro area who are experimenting with drugs and dealing with addiction is becoming a public health problem of epic proportions.

Dennis Ballinger is one of the Colorado medical professionals who can attest to that.

Ballinger is a clinical manager with AllHealth Network which focuses on treating mental health and addiction issues. AllHealth Network is the new name of the Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network.

In April, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that Colorado leads all states in regular marijuana use among 12 to 17 year olds.

Teen marijuana use increased 24 percent after Colorado allowed medical marijuana in 2010. That number increased another 8 percent after the passing of recreational marijuana in 2013.

The Denver Police Department reports arrests for marijuana use at public schools increased 6 percent between the 2013 and '14 school years.

Marijuana is not the only drug teenagers are using.

Colorado comes in second for the highest amount of pain pill abuse in the U.S., 29 percent of Colorado 12th graders have taken pills without a doctor's prescription.

Ballinger has learned from teenagers that is very common for them to grab prescription medications from their parent's medicine cabinets and take them to "pill parties" where they get high.

Teen users at a much higher risk of becoming addicts compared to adults, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. The agency also reports the earlier in adolescence someone starts using, the higher the risk they will become addicted.

At the AllHealth Network, therapists work with teenagers and their families on an out-patient

basis to bring the addict back to health. Once a teen can stop the drug use, the focus turns to recovery and addressing mental health symptoms. Therapists help the teens focus on behavior modification and relationship skills so that they are stronger and able to make more positive social choices.