

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 15, 2009

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Kids Converge on Capitol to Rise above Drugs

Annual Red Ribbon Rally underscores positive trends, but risks still evident

Austin, TX – Nearly 1,000 fifth- and sixth-grade students from across the state converged on the Texas Capitol today to participate in this year’s Red Ribbon Rally against drugs. Crowds of cheering kids holding placards proclaiming “2 Smart 2 Start” and “2 Smart 4 Drugs” underscored the need to remain vigilant amidst mixed news about drug use among children.

The latest data from the biennial 2008 Texas School Survey of Substance Abuse show overall teen use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs has continued a gradual decline since 2006. However, the study, derived from surveys of more than 153,000 Texas students in grades four through 12, also showed an alarming 34 percent increase since 2006 in secondary students who had abused over-the-counter cough medicines containing dextromethorphan, or DXM, in the previous 30 days.

Prescription drug abuse also continues to be a problem in Texas with 6.3 percent of secondary students reporting abuse of pain medications such as Vicodin®, Lortab® or Lorcet® in their lifetime. In a promising development, the national Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) released this past May by the National Partnership for a Drug-Free America, cited a strong increase in parental awareness of the dangers of teen abuse of prescription medications.

According to the PATS 2008 survey, in a single year’s time, the number of parents who mistakenly believe that abusing prescription medicines is “much safer” than using illicit street drugs dropped by nearly half—from 19 percent in 2007 to only 10 percent in 2008.

“Parents being more aware of the risks of prescription drug abuse is a good first step,” said Partnership for a Drug-Free America, Texas Alliance Director Chris Sharman. “Now parents need to impart the risk of using drugs, alcohol and cigarettes to their kids.”

PATS and Texas School Survey research showed that kids who learn a lot at home about the risks of drugs are up to 50 percent less likely to use drugs than those who do not. Sharman urged

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parents to visit www.TimeToTalk.org for tips on talking to their kids about the dangers of drugs.

“We hope that by bringing students to the Capitol, exposing them to anti-drug programs and showing them how our government operates and laws are made, we will leave a lasting impression on them that will serve as an inspiration for healthy decisions,” added Sharman.

This year’s Red Ribbon Rally featured red t-shirts, emblazoned with the State Capitol motif and “Rise Above Drugs” as the rally cry for students. Students wore the t-shirts, sported red ribbons and held aloft anti-drug placards as they crowded on to the steps of the Capitol. They joined in anti-drug cheers while watching a special performance by famed Tejano singer Patsy Torres.

Also on hand to perform at the rally were the Texas Children’s Choir and stilt-walker Ben Schave, of Schave & Reilly, who dramatically underscored rising above drugs. Following the rally, the students participated in a mock legislative session in the House and Senate Chambers and voted on student-drafted anti-drug resolutions.

The rally, an annual tradition in which students voice their opposition to drugs, kicks off Red Ribbon Week, which is observed nationally Oct. 23-31. Students attending this year’s event hailed from Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Pflugerville and Austin – many beginning the anti-drug pilgrimage before sunrise, boarding buses bound for the Capitol.

The Red Ribbon campaign began as a grassroots movement to honor the memory of Enrique “Kiki” Camarena, a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent who was kidnapped, tortured and killed in 1985 by drug dealers in Mexico. The campaign has grown in to a major, national anti-drug awareness week, reaching millions of students each year. Communities and schools across the country annually observe Red Ribbon Week by holding educational events aimed at raising awareness about the dangers of drug use.

Sponsors for this year’s rally include: Texas Department of State Health Services; Partnership for a Drug-Free America, Texas Alliance; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; Federal Bureau of Investigation; United States Marshals Service; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives; Houston Crackdown, Houston Mayor’s Office; U.S. Attorney, Southern District of Texas; Texas National Guard Joint Counter Drug Task Force; Texas Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition–Dallas; San Antonio Fighting Back; AT&T Pioneers; National Screening Center; Blue Bell Creameries Inc.; Justice Federal Credit Union; San Antonio Police Officers Association; Combined Law Enforcement Association of Texas; and the Internal Revenue Service.

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