ECSU hosts law enforcers for talks on drug abuse

WILLIMANTIC — Approximately 120 law enforcement and social service personnel from across the state converged at Eastern Connecticut State University earlier this month for training about trends in local and nationwide illegal drug use.

The daylong training was conducted by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Connecticut State Police.

It was sponsored by the Community Life Improvement Project (CLIP). CLIP is a collaborative effort between Eastern and the Willimantic community created to promote healthy and responsible student behavior.

The training’s first presenter was John Scherbenske of the DEA, who spoke about trends in prescription drug use, synthetic designer drugs and methamphetamine.

Employed by the DEA since 1991, Scherbenske has “seen trends come and go,” but maintains that “through education, treatment and enforcement,” drug problems can be alleviated.

His presentation focused on prescription drug abuse, “which is by far the fastest growing drug problem in the United States.”

Because many of these drugs are opioid-based pain relievers, drugs like heroin are also increasing in popularity — as they share similar effects and addictive qualities.

Scherbenske also delved into the corrupt distribution of pharmaceuticals, describing “pill mills” or pharmacies that operate like black market drug dealers.

He also discussed synthetic designer drugs, which are perceived as being legal alternatives to certain illicit drugs.

“Marketed as incense, bath salts, plant food and other household items, these are often more harmful than traditional illicit drugs.”

Methamphetamine — with its dangerous and often rudimentary production techniques — is a much more popular drug in the western United States.

Kevin Quinlan, also employed by the DEA, covered topics similar to Scherbenske, but framed them within a local context.

During Quinlan’s 21 years with the DEA, he has served in locations from Mexico to New Hampshire.

“DEA has a global approach, it’s our largest law enforcement agency outside of the United States,” he said. “There are DEA offices in 67 countries. In New England alone there are more than 300 DEA agents.”

Among the topics covered in his presentation were the routes that heroin and cocaine travel to get to the United States — mostly from South and Central America — and New England’s skyrocketing problem with prescription drugs and heroin.

“Ninety nine percent of the world’s prescription drug abusers are in the United States,” Quinlan said. “Why? Because more drugs are prescribed here than anywhere else.”

Concluding the training was Christopher Bartolotta of the Connecticut State Police, who focused on driving under the influence (DUI) and the use of Narcan by police officers.

“DUI continues to be America’s most frequently committed violent crime;” he said. “Alcohol-related traffic deaths continue to account for approximately 40 percent of all traffic fatalities.”

Bartolotta discussed DUI detection and sobriety testing, as well as report writing and court procedures after an arrest.

Bartolotta also discussed the use of Narcan, an opioid antagonist used by first responders that may prevent a fatal overdose of opioids.

“In 2010, approximately 38,300 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States,” he said. “That’s one death every seven minutes.”

It is safe to assume this number would be lower with effective use of Narcan and other first responder treatments.

Bartolotta discussed the signs and symptoms of an overdose, gauging the scene for safety and how to administer Narcan.

This training was CLIP’s largest to date. Since its inception three years ago, the CLIP coalition has organized several trainings and events, mostly geared to the Willimantic community and designed to curb underage alcohol use among Eastern students.

This forum on drug abuse was opened statewide to law enforcement, mental health workers, substance abuse counselors and higher education personnel.

As it has grown in participation and reach, CLIP is now embedded into the strategic plan of Eastern.

To get involved and for updates of CLIP developments, visit its web site at www.wellke-clip.com.