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Truth

or

D.A.R.E.

America's leading anti-drug program excels at self-promotion, but does it keep kids off drugs?

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An animated DARE education video begins with a wide-eyed owl perched on a branch in the moonlight. The sun then rises over someone's idyllic model of America, over a shiny-clean neighborhood of brightly painted homes with sprite-green lawns and two-car garages. The children of someone's politically-correct imagination emerge from their homes and together begin

their daily walk to school.

But along the way the familiar puppy belonging to Police Officer DARE snatches the children's collaborative report about drugs and, running off, leads them through a gothic gate, which slams shut behind them.

So begins their journey through the *Land of Decisions and Choices*, a mysterious landscape of eerie winds, mushrooms and gnarled old trees, where the animated characters of substance abuse lurk and appear along the rocky path as if in a Disney funhouse. But this wilderness is scary: "This place is really strange," says one kid.

"Let's just find that dog and get outta here," says another.

The children are friends, successfully indoctrinated by DARE education. They influence each other to "give the cold shoulder" or "just say no" to the animated monsters of addiction.

"Excuse me, have you seen a small dog?" one kid asks a psychedelic apparition.

"Small dog? I remember seeing what my mind told me may have been the eee-looo-zhun of this small dog. But it wasn't his real dogness; there is a difference. What you follow might not be what you are led by and what leads you may not be followed. You follow?"

The monsters of addiction finally corner the kids in an alley, and the animators -- who have backed themselves into a corner as well -- give the kids a giant electrical outlet. Together, in a show of unity and force, the kids pull the plug on the looming substance beings. In a flash the monsters of addiction vanish. Good wins over evil. The children cheerfully celebrate an idyllic victory at the head of an idyllic classroom, with teacher (in a nun's habit) and police officer DARE beside them.

So goes the fiction.

For all the time and money put into this one educational tape, for all its sophistication as it works to capture the attention of children and to... what? ... to teach them? ... to indoctrinate them? ... there clearly are problems with the film -- and, more importantly, with the program of which it is a part.

It's important first to recognize just how pervasive DARE -- the Drugs and Alcohol Resistance Education Program -- has become. Used in 52 percent of U.S. school districts in all 50 states, and in 13 foreign countries, the DARE program is an enormous spider web of classes and outings, summer camps, banquets and awards ceremonies, all designed ostensibly to keep kids off drugs.

At all levels, the law enforcement community is deeply involved. DARE's greatest visibility -- its hook -- comes from its use of police officers, both uniformed and plain-clothed, armed and unarmed, as teachers. As a result, in addition to the web of programs for kids, there is a vast network of programs for cops. Officers receive special training and attend DARE workshops and conferences.

To pay for it all, police departments -- community by community across the country -- apply for and receive DARE grants, requiring an ever-growing bureaucracy to administrate the flow of money.

Developed in 1983 as a joint venture between the Los Angeles Police Department and the LA School Department, DARE quickly became a key weapon in the drug war arsenal, enjoying a strong push from former First Lady Nancy Reagan and her “just say no” campaign.

But now, after 12 years and billions of dollars spent, DARE is increasingly coming under fire. Support for the program seems to be weakening even among some police officers. As the whole of state and federal efforts to address the drug problem have failed to make a dent in drug trafficking or consumption, DARE appears to be merely one expensive piece of an entirely ineffectual strategy.

For the most part, critics of DARE have been written off as ideologues, as marijuana-users pushing a pro-drug agenda, as cop-haters. The public, meanwhile, appears willing to accept the pro-DARE hype at face value, showing little interest in debating alternatives such as decriminalization, and ignoring altogether the potential dangers of putting an armed, uniform-wearing individual -- a living, breathing manifestation of the power of the government -- in the position of educator, role model and confidante.

Missing from the public discourse is a mighty respect for authoritarianism -- a fear of the police state -- which should cause members of any democratic society at least to question the role military and paramilitary forces should be allowed to play in schools. But let's not get bogged down. Not yet. There are many other problems to consider.

One thing is immediately clear about DARE: it is very successful at securing and spending money. It has become an industry unto itself, pumping large sums of cash into a select list of suppliers and feeding its own self-perpetuating bureaucracy. As with most bureaucratic undertakings, money is often wasted. In some cases, money is simply being misused.

In Massachusetts specifically, questions are arising even among law enforcement officials about how the state's DARE money has been allocated and whether various recipients -- the State Police for example -- should be receiving DARE money at all.

All these questions and the problems they illuminate might be moot if there were sufficient evidence that DARE is successful in its overriding mission: to keep kids off drugs. But the evidence is to the contrary.

In the last few years, studies have indicated that DARE doesn't appear to be doing what it sets out to do. Efforts to bring this issue to the fore, however, have been largely thwarted.

That is what may be most alarming; the efficacy of DARE has yet to be debated openly with the taxpayers who fund the program to the annual tune of \$750 million in the United States -- \$5 million in Massachusetts alone. Instead, DARE administrators and law enforcement officials have done a, superb job of dodging bullets and burying reports. For the most part, DARE boosters have

found the national media perfectly happy to buy a cheer spin.

In Massachusetts, DARE today is funded mostly from the state's 25-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes. Since the sin tax was instituted a few years ago, the state has collected about \$100 million annually. The bulk of the \$100 million goes to anti-cigarette campaigns. DARE gets about \$5 million a year.

Ultimately, the state Executive Office of Public Safety has oversight of the state's DARE program and its funding. While Public Safety Secretary Kathleen O'Toole (formerly Lt. Col. O'Toole of the Massachusetts State Police) is nominally in charge of the program, day-to-day oversight has fallen to two of her subordinates: Public Affairs Director Charles McDonald and Programs Director Kevin Harrington. McDonald handles the media; Harrington deals with the logistics of doling out state funds to grant applicants.

Last month the public safety officials sent out the annual grants -- about \$4.5 million to 269 cities and towns. In a press release issued by her office, O'Toole sounded bullish on DARE, while introducing her newly created in-house watchdog board: "As we implement the third year of this tremendously successful statewide program, my thanks go to the members of the DARE Advisory Board which help review, grade and make recommendations on grants, as well as provide needed oversight to this program."

Picked up and run with little added explanation by news outlets, O'Toole's comments were in some ways an indirect reference to a Boston Globe investigation the year before. The Globe discovered that communities throughout the state were misusing DARE money.

In Haverhill, the Globe reported, police used \$774 in DARE funds to buy an air conditioner for the station. In Newbury, police bought a \$200 stapler. Newton police bought \$7,602 worth of video and lighting equipment. In Monson, police spent \$10,000 on a personal computer, a portable radio and a pager for each of the two DARE officers. The Globe quoted one police chief who said many departments view the DARE money as "free cash," with which departments can plug other holes in funding.

The Globe surfaced other problems as well. Many small communities with fairly well-contained drug problems, for example, received large grants, while big cities with considerably bigger drug problems received little funding. From fiscal '94 awards totaling \$4,978,549 Public Safety Office printouts show a wide disparity in grants, with towns like Ashfield, which received \$28,190, requesting and receiving more than Amherst at \$14,990 or Agawam at \$16,350. Others, such as Greenfield and Williamsburg, did not apply. O'Toole had responded to the Globe's report at the time it was printed: "No question, we need to tighten procedures. What good is it to have procedures if nobody is going to comply with them? If we're letting that happen, shame on us." She pledged to tighten controls.

So O'Toole's office created an advisory board - not an unexpected bureaucratic response. The public safety officials evened out the allocations this year; big cities generally received more than smaller cities. The grant applications also may have been more closely scrutinized. But little else appears to have changed in the last year.

For example, O'Toole seemed to agree last year that the purchase of electronics equipment was not an acceptable use of DARE money. "This money is supposed to be spent for direct service to kids. If some department buys computers, then it better be computers that the kids themselves get to use," she told the Globe.

But a recent analysis of expenditure accounts from some 17 local police departments showed continued use of DARE money to buy computers and electronic components. From June '97 to July '95, six departments alone spent at least \$15,127 on electronics: Ashfield spent \$1,990; Lee spent \$2,330; Northampton spent \$7,276; Orange spent \$1,109; South Hadley spent \$1,849; Ware spent \$4,473.

While most claim they need computers to track student progress, monitor programs, develop DARE materials, proposals and reports, officers have privately indicated that "database development" and "student tracking" are surveillance operations in disguise. Similarly, video palmcoders and photo equipment used to record DARE sessions for later use can, and some say will, be used for street, school and community surveillance.

If the level of control in Boston has improved, it is still hard to make sense of some of the line items, particularly lines marked "miscellaneous" or "other."

For example, Pittsfield spent more than \$3,000 last year for conference-related activities. It turns out the money was spent on car rentals in Orlando, Fla. And stays at a Hyatt Regency. How the trip fits into a local DARE program is hard to imagine.

There's all sorts of spending going on, some of it hard to square with what began as a classroom-based drug resistance program: Holyoke spent some \$3,300 for three-day trips to the Mt. Tom water slide and \$2,160 for summer camp instructors to stay at a Holiday Inn for 10 days. Ware spent \$1,458 on an office chair and file cabinets.

Orange's DARE program paid \$350 for two New England Patriots as guest speakers, \$210 for the limousine that brought them (critics argue that football players make poor role models.) Orange spent \$2,184 on something called the Orange Police Cadet Program.

While O'Toole may have brought some small improvements to the oversight of DARE spending, three major allocations remain outside her purview. Last year, the Mass Criminal Justice Training Council was awarded \$214,826; the Department of Public Health \$250,000; and the State Police \$391,157.

The Department of Public Health funds are, in effect, rerouted money, to the degree that DPH disburses money from the tobacco tax in the first place. The Training Council funding also strikes some as excessive. But the State Police funding is most curious of all, even among some law enforcement officials. Northampton Police Chief Russell Sienkiewicz, for example, still hasn't been given what he would consider a good explanation for the allocations.

"Since when do the State Police do DARE Programs?" Sienkiewicz asked rhetorically. "No one can clearly answer how the dollar figures were arrived at, but State Police and Criminal Justice Training Council awards are a mystery to me. I put in a few phone calls to see where that money went. I got no answers. The [Criminal Justice] Training Council is responsible for officer training, and that's a lot of money for an agency that doesn't have any responsibility to schools or municipal governments. And I don't see a huge influx of troopers coming in to teach about DARE." State Police sources defend the expenditure.

"Over the past three years we've taught over 20,000 students," said Sgt. Brian O'Hara, State Police DARE coordinator in Lowell. "We have 13 DARE officers assigned across the state and we've worked in over 46 communities, with officers working from K to 12th grade."

But as often is the case when talking to public officials about DARE, there is a growing hesitancy to get behind the program completely.

"I don't think I belong in the classroom," O'Hara said. "I'd like to see less police. We have a major

problem and we're addressing it with Band-Aids."

And mighty expensive Band-Aids at that, in large part because police work at a fairly healthy hourly rate - particularly when they're working overtime.

Statewide last year, DARE overtime exceeded \$601,555, or 12 percent of all fiscal '94 DARE money. State Police were the big spenders at \$49,484. Municipalities with big DARE over-time bills include Auburn at \$17,520; Foxboro at \$31,300; Hampden at \$14,442; Lincoln at \$15,000; Longmeadow at \$14,856; Pembroke at \$12,863; Pittsfield at \$13,929; Shrewsbury at \$15,840; South Hadley at \$9,584; Webster at \$12,595; and West Springfield at \$17,334.

Of the 17 local departments reviewed, Pelham's report of DARE expenditures stood head and shoulders above the rest. While Pittsfield sent a one-page "report" listing only major category totals for its \$39,965 grant, Pelham carefully documented how it used a grant one-10th the size - \$3,978 to be specific

"We don't do cream puffs," said Pelham

Selectman Jeanne Shumway. "The chief's not going to ask for something that he can't justify. He takes things very literally. He asked for what he needed. What shocks me is how some other towns can justify the things they spend this money on - it's like stealing the children's future."

Perhaps it goes without saying, but it's not just public agencies who are sharing the DARE loot.

"Because DARE is a certified program, you have to use certain companies," said Pelham Chief Ed Fleury. "It's a certified monopoly with a lot of big business interests and big corporate sponsors like Kentucky Fried Chicken." And where big business is involved, money talks.

"Before Hanna-Barbara got into it and changed the logo to a lion, DARE used to be represented by bears," Fleury continued, adding that such direct corporate involvement hasn't always been well received. "At the national level, a lot of people are unhappy about the politics," he said.

One of the major players at the national level is a non-profit called DARE America, which provides training to police officers and supplies a wide range of DARE materials and paraphernalia. In addition to being one of DARE's biggest boosters, DARE America works to give the program a certain uniformity, particularly when it comes to merchandising.

Not surprisingly then, in an analysis of 17 local police departments, DARE America came out a big winner. A significant amount of DARE money also paid for goods and materials purchases from a select group of local vendors; much of spending went for more advertising and merchandising. Seven departments alone spent more than \$15,000 on T-shirts. Tens of thousands of dollars were also spent on DARE pins; bumper stickers; mugs; squeeze bottles; buttons; caps, pens; pencils; brochures; rulers; wrist bands, magnets; emblems; banners; and other miscellaneous paraphernalia. On the one hand, the DARE programs seem to feed the ethic of consumption and waste. DARE administrators might do well to heed the words of the DARE song: "The world's a different place/ where life becomes a race/ and unlike the world of past/ our kids grow up too fast/ so what they see in store/ is the threat of bombs and war/ and the deadly game they're taught/ is that happiness is bought."

But it is also important to recognize that this vast merchandising - as it is in any corporate enterprise - is a form of propaganda, a means of creating and controlling public perception. Most local police departments, it is worth noting, also used public funds to purchase pro-DARE ads in local newspapers.

After 12 years, there is one overarching question about DARE. In a recent interview, Pelham Police Chief Fleury posed it rhetorically: "Does DARE prevent drug abuse?" Fleury acknowledged that he doesn't really know. "But I have a hard time spending tax dollars on bumper stickers and buttons. I'm more conservative," he said.

It is clear that Fleury is not entirely sold on the way the DARE program is working. "The creation of grants and the distribution of grants means more complications and more reports and more jobs

and less money to do the job that's needed," Fleury said. "Instead, you have to tell a pretty story. You've got to be a fiction writer and a sweet talker to get the grant money. I just want to do the job."

But it is not clear that the job can be done this way - if the job is to keep kids off drugs.

In October 1994, a three-year study conducted for the National Institute of Justice- the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice - found that while DARE may well improve kids' attitudes toward police, the program had not had a measurable effect on drug abuse

The report, done by the Research Triangle Institute, author of hundreds of highly regarded government studies in the past, stood up under peer review. Researchers noted that their study was based in part on all previous studies, and that in every case the conclusions had been just about the same: DARE has no effect on drug use.

But the study was buried. The government did release the most reaffirming findings from the report: DARE was popular with kids and parents, and there was tremendous political support for its expansion. But in the end, NIJ refused to publish the report, claiming that it had not met the government's "high standards of methodological rigor."

On the local level, DARE boosters are quick to note that the justice department stepped away from last year's study. At the Executive Office of Public Safety, Charles McDonald instead offers a survey by Northeastern University. Its findings are fairly clear: DARE is very popular; parents believe it is effective in reducing drug use and in improving relations between young people and police officers.

That public policy therefore follows public opinion is to be expected, even if public money has been used to shape public opinion in the first place.

As it exists today - materialistic and superficial - DARE is little equipped to directly benefit kids. Ironically, the most powerful programs yet developed with DARE funds have been to get kids, particularly urban kids, away from their normal surroundings and into the woods and onto the rivers. (See related story) Here, kids see that escape, peace-of-mind, solitude, harmony, are all possible without the use of drugs.

It's strange then that the DARE education video should portray wild nature as scary, foreign and - inhabited by the looming monsters of addiction - inherently evil. To kids, it sends a message that the wilderness is dangerous and, by extension, that the increasingly violent landscape of civilization is "safe."

This is an illusion fostered by a system that transforms an issue of public health welfare into one of criminal justice and national security. In this vision, the Land of Decisions and choices is a land where all decisions will be made for you and where - if corporations, politicians and the poser elite continue to have it their way - it will never occur to you that anything called "choice" could ever previously have existed.

DARE To Say No

How are municipalities actually spending their DARE grants? Given public information laws, I didn't think it would be very hard to find out I was wrong.

Whether intentionally obstructive or merely too busy to help, public safety officials at all levels seemed reluctant to share public information about DARE.

On Jan. 4, 1995 I wrote to some 21 central and western Massachusetts police departments seeking records of fiscal '94 DARE grant expenditures (per Mass General Laws, statues 950 CMR 32:03 and 950CMR 32:08, which designate information open and available to the public). Under state law, I noted, departments are required to respond within 10 days.

By Jan. 24, after I further contacted many departments by phone, only four had responded.

In a Feb. 6, 1995 letter to Mary Schwind, Acting Supervisor for Public Records at the Mass Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, I noted: More than half of the police departments had not

responded at all; responses were general, incomplete or vague; several requested advance payment of exorbitant copy and search fees (the law does allow for "reasonable" fees); two police departments refused to comply.

By Feb. 30, staff lawyers assigned by the Secretary's Office to contact various police departments had informed them, that, by law, they must provide the information. Unwilling to comply in a timely and reasonable manner up front, several police chiefs were further angered at being "turned in to the state."

The Buckland Police Department, for example, responded with "a bill in advance [\$34.10] which must be paid under law for your request. This bill reflects the lowest paid officer that will be doing the research, copying and mailing of all requested records."

On Feb. 6, I sent a letter to the Executive Office of Public Safety, the oversight agency for DARE, seeking grant expenditures information. The response, slow in coming, was general and vague in nature. State DARE administrators were not available to answer my follow-up questions. All inquiries were funneled through Charles McDonald, a public relations specialist, Detailed information about the state Police and Criminal Justice Training Council expenditures, first requested in writing ON Feb. 25, later in subsequent phone calls, and in-person on Sept. 25, still has not been provided.

In the end I was able to get some information. But in the course of my investigation more than 100 letters to state officials were left unanswered. Faxes promised were never sent. Follow-up calls led to new promises unfulfilled.

'If something works...'

For all its problems, the DARE program surely has had its share of success stories, many having nothing at all to do with drugs.

Some police departments have developed programs that may well outlive the DARE program from which they grew.

South Hadley's program offering 150 kids a limited "wilderness experience" on the Connecticut River is a good example - the expense of more than \$3,466 for five aluminum canoes notwithstanding.

"No program is perfect, but nothing else seems to have worked," said South Hadley Police Chief William Schenker. "I am especially proud of the 'Outdoor Adventure' aspects of our program. The positive response that the canoe trips generated among our young people is amazing. I only wish more adults would participate to alleviate the need for police officers on an overtime basis. Money could be used elsewhere."

How many civilian workers and how many hours of activities could be sponsored with last year's \$601,555 DARE overtime? At least 60,155 hours at \$10 an hour. Similarly, in fiscal '94, South Hadley provided eight canoe trips with some 15 to 18 kids each. Translating overtime (\$9,584) to paid adult positions yields 958 hours at \$10 an hour. With four adults for every 15 kids, this translates to 39 outings of 6 hours each.

"We shall continue the canoe trips," said Chief Schenker. "If something works, why fix it? We plan to expand the out-door theme by taking hikes and bicycle trips within our budgetary restraints. Feed-back from youth involved indicates they realize the importance of good physical health more than ever. And we have observed eagles and other wildlife, gone fishing and swimming, cooked outdoors and genuinely enjoyed each others' company."