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CONTACT:
Dan Kline, Media Specialist
917-523-3496, dan@notastep.com

Teens from across the state come together to make positive decisions

"Tha Hip Hop Doc" Dr. Rani Whitfield addresses state-wide SADD Conference

HARTFORD -- "Don't let people around you make bad decisions for you," Orange Police Lieutenant Anthony Cuozzo told nearly 100 teenagers from 22 Connecticut schools at the second annual Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) Conference Monday.

Lieutenant Cuozzo delivered the keynote address at the conference, and he stressed that the students in attendance learn from leaders both good and bad.

"It is so important for you, as young people, to understand what it takes to make good decisions," he said. "To be a real leader, it is important to get out there, and when you see someone doing the wrong thing, say something. That won't make you the most popular person at the party, but that can't matter. You still have to do the right thing."

Making informed decisions and taking control of your own destiny were recurring themes of the day, which featured five workshops and two keynote addresses. In addition to learning about alcohol and drug prevention, the attendees were able to attend panels on conflict resolution and understanding alcohol industry marketing tactics.

During the marketing tactics workshop, The Governor's Prevention Partnership Program Manager Catherine LeVasseur showed the attendees practical examples of how the messages they see on TV and even the packaging of products can be an attempt to tempt them to drink. She repeatedly flipped back and forth between the colorful, inviting packages of non-alcoholic "energy" drinks, noting their similarity to the packaging of "alcopops," which are often the first alcoholic beverage a teenager will try. "Alcopops" are sweet, flavored alcoholic beverages that mimic the characteristics of popular kids' beverages, such as lemonade.

Giving the teenagers in attendance practical strategies and helping them to make informed decisions was the mission of many of the speakers and workshop facilitators.

"It was exciting to see so many students take an active role in their communities and be so willing to help their classmates," said The Governor's Prevention Partnership President/CEO Jill K. Spinetti. "Whenever I think about why we work so hard at The Governor's Prevention Partnership, it's because of kids like this. We have to do whatever we can to give them what they need to be successful."

Perhaps the highlight of the day was an energetic keynote speech by "Tha Hip Hop Doc," Dr. Rani G. Whitfield, M.D. A board-certified family physician with a Certificate of Added Qualification in sports medicine,

Dr. Whitfield is an impassioned advocate for increasing youth awareness of health-related issues, including HIV/AIDS, obesity, cardiovascular disease and substance abuse. By combining hip-hop culture and health messages, Dr. Whitfield empowers individuals to change unhealthy lifestyles.

After leading the teenage attendees in a chant about owning their lives and making their own decisions, Dr. Whitfield explained that he had come to speak to the audience that day because too many young people are dying from preventable causes.

"Young people are dying from HIV, obesity, hypertension and cigarette smoking. Cigarette smoking is the single most preventable cause of death in our country, though obesity will soon be taking that over," Tha Hip Hop Doc said. "When I talk to you guys, no matter what you have, your health is the most important thing you have."

ABOUT THE GOVERNOR'S PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP

Created in 1989, The Governor's Prevention Partnership is a not-for-profit partnership between state government and business leaders with a mission to keep Connecticut's youth safe, successful and drug-free. Co-chaired by Governor M. Jodi Rell, The Partnership provides leadership and services to help schools, communities, youth organizations, colleges and businesses create and sustain quality programs in these core areas:

- Increasing the number of youth who have the caring support of a mentor;
- Helping local communities build coalitions and programs to address underage drinking;
- Helping schools develop and implement effective drug and violence prevention programming including Student Assistance Programs, bullying, conflict resolution and peer mediation programs;
- Delivering anti-drug messages through the media; and
- Giving parents the skills they need to protect their children against drugs and other problems.

The Governor's Prevention Partnership works in collaboration with local, regional and statewide providers to maximize youth development programming without duplicating services. The Partnership's programs affect children in virtually every community in the state.

ABOUT SADD

SADD is a peer-to-peer youth prevention organization founded in 1981. As host to the Connecticut state SADD coordinator, The Governor's Prevention Partnership provides support to the more than 100 registered SADD chapters in the state and assists new chapters in forming. SADD's role is to provide enough information and support for teens to make healthy decisions. Members make changes through role modeling, positive peer pressure and environmental prevention strategies. They focus on issues such as underage drinking, drugs, risky and impaired driving, teen violence and teen suicide.

Media Availability: The Governor's Prevention Partnership President/CEO Jill K. Spinetti and Program Manager Catherine LeVasseur are available for interviews, as is Lieutenant Anthony Cuozzo. "Tha Hip Hop Doc" Dr. Rani G. Whitfield is available on a limited basis.

For interviews: Contact Daniel Kline, 917-523-3496

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