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Mental health Youth Ambassador program expands to all county districts

By Katherine Schaeffer kschaeffer@timesonline.com 18 hrs ago



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Rochester High School freshman Sasha Wade works on a poster that students created with the acronym VOICE, as Beaver Falls High School senior Jeff Rose, right, and Rochester sophomore Sylvelt Bibbs watch in September at the Community College of Beaver County in Center Township. This mental health Youth Ambassador program has officially spread to all the school districts in the county.

CENTER TWP. -- Health and social service organizations, schools and families across the United States will observe National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day later this week, and after a workshop at Penn State-Beaver Tuesday, a group of about 90 Beaver County high school students are prepared to tackle the sometimes tough topic.

The students represented high schools across the county as mental health awareness Youth Ambassadors, and Tuesday's daylong workshop -- the third of its kind this school year -- was designed to educate and inspire them with presentations that addressed topics including grief and loss, cultural competency and personal recovery stories.

Students also had the opportunity to talk with local health and social support organizations that set up tables outside the student center's auditorium. Students stopped at tables to scoop up pamphlets or chat with representatives from groups including Cornerstone Recovery & Supports, The Franklin Center of Beaver County, Highmark Caring Place and Women's Center of Beaver County.

Beaver County System of Care launched the Youth Ambassador Program last fall with the goal of equipping local high school students with the tools to promote awareness and understanding of mental health issues within their school districts, said Susan Smith, a program specialist at the Beaver County Rehabilitation Center and a program organizer.

Youth Ambassadors meet quarterly as a larger group for training and to share what they've accomplished at their schools, Smith said.

The initiative encourages students to take what they learn at each training back to their high schools and help create student-driven peer support networks, Smith said. The hope is that these networks will be anchored with student-run clubs that promote awareness of mental health issues and create a space where struggling peers can go for support.

High school counselor Angela Manno, who oversees Beaver Falls' district-level program says she's already thinking ahead to how Beaver Falls' 18 Youth Ambassadors might expand their reach in the fall, which could include incorporating time into the school day where students can meet one-on-one with an ambassador.

The Youth Ambassador initiative kicked off during a pilot event in September with buy in from five school districts: Aliquippa, Big Beaver Falls Area, Freedom Area, New Brighton Area and Rochester Area. That group has grown to include every Beaver County school district as well as Baden's CLASS Academy, Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School and Quigley Catholic High School.

School guidance counselors and administrators selected the first group of ambassadors based on their strong leadership potential, although new ambassadors can have varying levels of knowledge about mental health issues.

The Youth Ambassador Program is one initiative intended to build on the existing system of care for youth ages 13 to 21 who have a behavioral diagnosis. The program complements services already present in the schools, such as school-based mental health services and Student Assistance Program, or SAP, teams. As youth ambassadors, students receive training about how to effectively respond when a classmate needs help.

The Youth Ambassador Program is funded through a grant the county obtained from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA. The grant is intended to support the county's system of care, HELPing BC-SCORES, which is a collaborative effort among several county social service agencies.

Data collection is another component of the program, and the organizers have enlisted Alex Jendrek, of Pittsburgh-based applied research firm HPW Associates LLC, to measure the program's effectiveness through data collection and analysis.

The students will periodically complete a 16-question evaluation designed to assess measures of empathy, Jendrek said. Their answers will be used to determine whether the program has shifted their perspective and if so, which aspects of the program were most effective.

Educators overseeing the programs at the pilot high schools say they've already noticed some positive culture shifts.

Manno, says she's noticed Beaver Falls' Youth Ambassadors have become more aware of their peers' potential struggles – and more likely to reach out to them -- since they attended the first countywide session.

Manno says that ambassadors have approached her several times to ask which resources would be most appropriate to pass along to a peer.

Beaver Falls' Youth Ambassadors have organized a series of activities for National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day on May 4, said. The ambassadors will set up a table at lunch complete with pamphlets and helpline information and have a presentation on feelings planned for the district's first and second graders.

Rochester Area School District's 10 Youth Ambassadors were chosen based on their leadership potential, and the group has fostered friendships among students who might otherwise not have gotten to know each other, said Jen Milne, a special education teacher and transition coordinator who moderates Rochester's group.

Milne says she's already had students inquire about how they can get involved next year.

Ambassadors, like Beaver Falls High School 11th-grader Sydney Smith, said the program promotes valuable conversations about mental health topics, and she's looking forward to connecting with peers from across the county.

"We all come from different places, but we all struggle with similar things," Smith said.