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Contact: Toniann Richard
Office: 660.259.9019 Cell: 816.807.7774
Toniann@HCCNetwork.org

Lafayette County Students Get Fired-up about Smoke-free Communities
HCC's Healthy Lifestyles Initiative Give Students Platform to Spread Awareness

After 20 years, cigarette warning labels are changing. The Food and Drug Administration recently unveiled nine graphic warnings on cigarette labels—images that are meant to shock. For some area high school students, this move could not have come soon enough. If it was up to them, every community would be smoke free, especially given the fact that second hand smoke can be deadly too.

“There is [no] safe level of second hand smoke,” said Alex Higginbotham a sophomore at Odessa High School and one of several ***Students With a Goal (SWAG)*** promoting smoke-free communities.

“Everyone has the right to breathe clean, smoke-free air. We need to educate businesses, community members, and youth about the dangers of smoking and the dangers of second hand smoke,” Higginbotham said.

Motivated for change

Higginbotham and Glenn Banhart, another sophomore at Odessa High School were two of about 60 students who recently attended a tobacco-free advocacy conference in Fulton, MO. The two-day conference, where students educated students about tobacco use, was headlined by Victor DeNoble, Ph.D. He was the whistle-blowing scientist for Phillip Morris who spoke against tobacco use in the early 1990s, citing the dangers of nicotine addiction and serving as a key witness in the Federal government’s case against the tobacco industry.

“We need to treat nicotine addiction the way we treat other addictions,” he told conference goers.

With this in mind, students will take what they’ve learned and recruit other students to spread awareness about tobacco use in their respective communities. “SWAG is a new program that’s working in tandem with Lexington High School’s Smoke Busters,” said Glenda Bertz, an RN with the Lafayette County Health Department. “The year-long program is designed to raise awareness about the benefits of smoke-free communities. Students will create PSAs, write letters to the editor, speak to community groups, visit restaurants and other establishments to get the word out.”

Telltale signs

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 20 percent of deaths in the U.S. are related to smoking. In Lafayette County, 19 percent of adults smoke, according to the 2011 Missouri County Health Rankings prepared by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin. In Missouri, 23.3 percent of adults smoke, according to the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFFH). Additionally, MFFH reports that 56.3 percent of Missourians would champion a smoke-free workplace law that includes indoor workplaces like restaurants, bars and casinos.

Lafayette County is addressing smoking cessation with the help of the Health Care Coalition of Lafayette County and a Social Innovation of Missouri (SIM) grant awarded by the MFFH, with matching funds from the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City.

Students like Higginbotham and Banhart will be called on by the HCC's Healthy Lifestyle initiative to rally elected officials, business owners and other community stakeholders to address smoking policies, create smoke-free establishments and post smoke-free signs.

Empowered to Lead

"With the help of our funders, we will work alongside student tobacco-free advocates to reduce and hopefully eliminate tobacco use in workplaces and restaurants," said Toniann Richard, the HCC's executive director. "Plain and simple, tobacco use kills—and these students get that. Our hope is that elected officials and community leaders will be receptive to them and their mission to create smoke-free communities."

"Adults and the business community need to open their doors to youth who are interested in providing information about the benefits of clean indoor air," said Traci (Harr) Kennedy, coordinator for the Columbia Tobacco Prevention Initiative. "These students are well trained and passionate. They provide a unique energy as it relates to improving the health of the community. Don't underestimate the power of the voice of your youth—the future leaders of our communities and our state."

For more information, contact the HCC at 660.259.9019.

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