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Teens advocate against prescription drug abuse

Advertisement

By Angela Loucks

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You've seen commercials on TV. You hear about it in the news. You never think about it happening in our community, but it does. It's prescription drug abuse.

Thanks to a federal AODA grant that was awarded to West Junior High School, East Junior High School and Lincoln High School, local students are volunteering to do something about it.

The West Teen Advocates was formed a year ago to help spread the word. According to Katie Zagorianakos, a WTA member and eighth-grader at West, "We try to stop people from using prescription drugs to get high, but also alcohol and other drugs."

Ryan Ginter, also a WTA member and eighth-grader at West, added, "We don't want to be called Generation RX."

Most recently, the group organized a presentation on April 21 at the West Junior High auditorium. Two speakers were present to talk to approximately 35 parents. One speaker talked about his personal experience with prescription drugs, cocaine and alcohol; he also talked about his recovery from addiction.

Additionally, a Wisconsin Rapids narcotics detective talked about the legal aspects of addiction, the consequences, and things that he's seen and done on the job. During the presentation, lock boxes also were distributed.

"We felt prescription drug abuse needed to be addressed. It's a growing problem and becoming more evident. More people are using it at the junior high age level," said Matthew Renwick, dean of students/athletic director at West Junior High.

Using the grant, Hilary Bilbrey, from Inspired by Families, trained the students, and Heather Lisitza, from Woodside Elementary, became AODA coordinator.

Other activities that the group does are fundraising and promotions. They were interviewed by Jim Walsh on River Cities Community Access; interviewed by Chris Wooldridge on WFHR; they wrote a letter to the editor; and they have their own Web site at

Volunteer spotlight

Name: West Teen Advocates

Nominating agency: West Junior High School

Location: West Junior High School and training sessions at McMillan Memorial Library

When started: 2007

How many members: 17

Ages of members: 13 to 15

Activities: This group advocates AODA abstinence, focusing on prescription drugs.

www.wrps.org/schools/west/wjhadvocates.cfm.

Finally, the group distributed an anonymous survey to all homerooms recently and came up with some very interesting findings. They asked questions like, "Do you know where prescription drugs are stored in your home? Is it locked up? Do you use it?" and "What prescription drugs are you familiar with?"

According to Renwick, "Race and economic level didn't matter. Any class can abuse prescription drugs."

"By a small margin, girls abused it more than boys," Ginter said.

"The most times you see this abuse is in the junior high level. This is when it starts," Zagorianakos said.

The group also found that popular prescription drugs are OxyContin, a pain killer given to cancer patients, and Ritalin and Adderall, which are used by ADHD patients.

"We learned from the presentations that while ADHD drugs work correctly for ADHD patients -- it calms them down -- it has the opposite effect on other people. It acts like speed," Renwick said. "And adult-strength prescriptions are even stronger on youth. OxyContin is like heroin for youth."

Erik Vruwink, another WTA member and a ninth-grader at West Junior High, said, "Local kids are having 'pharming parties' where they take pills, throw them in a bowl and take whatever they want."

"These parties have serious consequences," Renwick said. "Sometimes the kids don't know what they are taking, or they don't know what are the side effects of mixing prescriptions together. Last year, a group of kids from Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids got together for a pharming party and one of them died. A Wisconsin Rapids student went to jail for hosting the party."

Finally, the group learned that only one in 20 parents is aware that their kids may be facing these issues. But hopefully, thanks to the efforts of volunteers from West Teen Advocates, that trend could change.

"Most of us like being a part of West Teen Advocates, so we can get the point across," said Zagorianakos. "We can do something about this and stop it from happening."

The next presentation the group will put on will be Thursday at West Junior High School. The Backstrom family will talk about drinking and driving; this family lost three of its five sons to a drunken driver. A DVD of the April 21 presentation is available for check out. Call Renwick at West for more information.

The Volunteer Spotlight is a monthly feature. If your nonprofit organization has an outstanding volunteer, or group of volunteers, please call United Way of Inner Wisconsin's Volunteer Center at 421-0390.