

Thayer Central youth serve as leaders to support youth prevention initiatives

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According to the 2015 Nebraska Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 22.7 percent of adolescents have consumed one or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past 30 days, and 14.3 percent of adolescents have engaged in binge drinking in the past 30 days. Nationally, as reported by the CDC, alcohol is the most commonly used substance of abuse among America's youth. Two students in our community are working to prevent underage drinking and substance use through leadership and community connections.

The Youth Action Board (YAB) is coordinated by Region V Systems Prevention Team and is comprised of high school and college youth, to develop youth leadership within their home communities. YAB works to reduce youth substance use and underage drinking through a variety of community activities and initiatives. YAB sponsors three annual events: June Jam, Red/White Tailgate, and Youth Leadership Day, which includes over 1,000 youth and 100 sponsors from all over Southeast Nebraska. Collin Fink and Maggie Harris, students at Thayer Central High School, serve as representatives of Thayer County on YAB. YAB is made up of 24 youth that represent communities all over southeast Nebraska. "This year, every county in Southeast Nebraska is represented," said Fink. Both Maggie and Collin have found that serving on YAB has opened up doors to experiences and opportunities that allow them to use their leadership skills to promote positive youth development in their community. Fink says he first became aware of YAB 10 years ago when his older brother Kesston became the first Thayer County student to become part of YAB. "I knew that coming into high school I wanted to be part of YAB," said Fink. He currently co-chairs as president of the board. Maggie, who is serving as co-committee chair, recalls hearing her older brothers talk about the fun they had at June Jam when she was younger. "I knew I wanted to try it," says Harris who also followed in her older brother Cole's footsteps, who served on YAB as a student.

Both teens believe that positive peer leadership is an important part of youth substance use prevention in their community. "Helping students to develop a culture of not drinking takes time and continued initiative," says Harris. "The message we want to share" says Collin, "is that you can have fun without drugs and alcohol." Promoting positive social norms around underage drinking, having open dialogue with students about risks associated with underage drinking and substance use and creating fun and inviting opportunities for kids to engage in drug and alcohol free events are important aspects of YAB.

Harris and Fink credit the positive influence of their parents in their decision to not engage in risky behaviors such as underage drinking or drug use. According to a study produced by the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility, 83 percent of adolescents say that their parents are the leading influence in their decision to not consume alcohol. The power of

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parents is something that families should not take for granted in efforts to prevent underage drinking. "It is important that parents sit down and talk openly to their kids about the dangers of substance use and the risks involved in underage drinking", said Fink. By talking with children early and often, parents can play a role in their child's choice not to drink. "Despite what kids may say, they really do care about what their parents think. If parents share with their kids their feelings and beliefs around underage drinking, then they will take that into consideration in the choices they make." said Harris.

While YAB is focused around substance use prevention initiatives, this year the group has had the opportunity to get involved in youth suicide prevention initiatives such as QPR (Question, Persuade and Refer). On Monday, March 6, both students had the opportunity to come to Lincoln to attend a training to learn about Hope Squads, a school-based, peer-to-peer suicide prevention program. "I think it is really cool that we are getting more involved in youth mental health awareness instead of just substance use. There are so many people that might be thinking about suicide, but we may not be aware that they are suffering because we don't recognize the warning signs." According to Fink, "I think Hope Squads stand for something so much bigger than suicide. It is raising awareness of emotional and mental health needs and giving kids an avenue to ask for help. Even though we may not have a high suicide rate in our community, I feel like there are a lot of issues, like depression, that maybe parents and teachers aren't seeing because they don't know what to look for." Both Fink and Harris are hoping to partner with other community members and school professionals to bring more awareness of the importance of suicide prevention and mental health awareness.

Youth are important players in the growth of our community. Leadership roles such as YAB and opportunities to enhance youth connectedness to their community can serve as protective factors that promote healthy youth development.