

Leadership Challenges Enhance On-the-Ground Tobacco Prevention

Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program

10/13/2020

High school students are standing atop a high ropes course. One has a blindfold on and works the course with guidance and encouragement from his team on the ground. “My ground buddy [Maci Fox] was cheering me on, so I had encouragement and I was safe,” said Erica VanDenheuvel. “It was scary, but it was a lot of fun.”

Experiencing a high ropes course is just one team-building activity for this group of students from Bertha-Hewitt High School in Bertha, Minnesota. They are attending a leadership retreat to help them in their efforts to prevent their peers from using commercial tobacco and becoming addicted.

“Tobacco use at our small school—cigarettes or chew or [vaping and other tobacco use]—is a big problem,” said Maci Fox. She and Erica co-lead the BEARS Club at Bertha-Hewitt High School in Bertha, Minnesota. Working with the Morrison-Todd-Wadena Community Health Board (MTW CHB), the BEARS Club members learn leadership skills they use to educate young people about the dangers of commercial tobacco use.

“We work with youth at many of our local schools,” said David Determan, Health Education Coordinator for Todd County Health and Human Services. “Every summer I host a youth leadership retreat where our focus is solely on the Tobacco 101 training.”

“We’re learning about the hundreds and hundreds of different chemicals in cigarettes, and the facts about how bad [commercial] tobacco is for your body,” said Fox. [Eric] agreed and added, “We also learned more about how addictive it is.”

“The youth groups also participate in events like Kick Butts Day in March,” noted Erica Keppers, a Public Health Nurse at Wadena County Public Health. The student leaders educate their peers about commercial tobacco, help each other to stay tobacco-free, and encourage healthy living. “And they have a great time,” said Keppers.

MTW CHB is supported in its community-based efforts as one of eleven recipients of a Tobacco-Free Communities (TFC) grant from the Minnesota Department of Health. TFC is a program to reduce smoking, prevent youth commercial tobacco use, and address tobacco-related disparities in Minnesota. The TFC grant program is part of a growing movement to promote community-driven commercial tobacco prevention and control activities and strategies.

The BEARS Club hosts activities outside of school that make it easier for students to avoid tobacco and substance use, and make healthier choices in this rural community. “We’ve hosted movie nights in the gym where we play some big movie that’s just come out and also have games and fun activities for kids,” said Fox. “It gives them options [to avoid unhealthy choices they may feel pressured by peers to make].”



Maci Fox takes a turn on the ropes challenge course.



Morrison-Todd-Wadena Community Health Board works with residents living in Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties. They conduct local tobacco community health assessments, and they are working with community organizations, businesses, and events to be tobacco free and free of tobacco promotions and sponsorship. They are also working to improve, expand, and create integrated cessation protocols into existing health care services and community networks.



The Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program is a program of the Minnesota Department of Health that aims to reduce youth tobacco use and address tobacco-related disparities in Minnesota by promoting community-driven tobacco prevention and control activities and strategies.

CHAMPION FOR LGBTQ HEALTH SEES PROGRESS

The leadership retreat helps the students build skills and confidence for their peer education work. “I’ve been able to grow into being a good leader, as well as knowing when it’s time to step back and let someone else’s voice be heard,” said Fox. “We’ve done a lot of team building here, and lots of physical activity—high ropes courses, canoeing, and hiking. I realize if I were to be putting those harmful substances in my body I probably wouldn’t be able to do all those things. This is a message we want all kids to hear.”

Minnesota Department of Health
PO Box 64882
St. Paul, MN 55164-0882
651-201-3535
tobacco@state.mn.us
www.health.mn.gov/tfc

10/13/2020

To obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-3535. Printed on recycled paper.



Youth leaders Erica VanDenheuvel (left) and Maci Fox (right) learn how goals are reached through teamwork—on the ropes course and in life.