

Coalition taking steps to curb underage drinking

by Briana Webster

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The Walker County Community in Action Coalition met Thursday and viewed a breakdown of alcohol and drug use among teens in Alabama and Walker County. Coalition members were also given a mandate on what their next step will be.

The coalition is a subcommittee of the Children's Policy Council that was established in 2013 to help prevent teens from making destructive decisions.

Recent results from a statistical survey were released showing the top 20 counties in the state that are at risk for underage drinking and other related issues.

A four-year grant was funded through the Alabama Department of Mental Health and made available to agencies who are Certified Prevention Providers with the department, such as Southern Prevention Associates in Clanton, in order to reduce underage drinking.

Tina Aaron, who is the coordinator of the coalition, said the meeting was very informative.

"I thought it was very eye-opening, especially when we got the survey back. We had over 700 people in the county take a survey from all different ages," Aaron said. "It gives their responses on how they feel about different things related to alcohol or marijuana or even parent parties and things like that."

Marcy McFarlin, the program evaluator for the grant, works with the president of Southern Prevention Associates, Penny Deavers. McFarlin informed the 13 individuals who attended the meeting about the latest data that has been collected within the county. The coalition consists of various representatives from Walker County, including Steven Aderholt of the Walker County Commission, April Knight from Northwest Alabama Mental Health, Mark Jarvis from the county's juvenile probation office, Walker County Board of Education member Sonia Waid, Walker County District Judge Henry Allred, Donna Kilgore of the Jasper Area Family Service Center and officials from Daybreak, Youth Advocate Programs and Parent Project, just to name a few.

According to research from a needs assessment of Walker County, "the greatest risk to the youth (sixth through 12th grades) in Alabama is underage drinking based on the following statistics: drinking and driving, riding with someone who had been drinking and binge drinking." Data stated by the ADMH ranks Walker County as No. 16 in the state for the percentage of youth who drink and drive, have ridden with someone who has been drinking or who binge drinks.

McFarlin gave a PowerPoint presentation during Thursday's meeting, which covered specific definitions of the terms used in the gathered data, such as consumption, contributing factors and intervening variables; consequence and consumption data examples; and results from people in Walker County who had taken the Communities in Action Community 2014 Survey.

"We had three different surveys. We surveyed the coalition. We surveyed over 700 people, 15 and up, in the entire county on 25 different questions," Aaron said. "... and then we did a three-question survey to key leaders of the community and different organizations, seven different groups."

Results showed 67.2 percent who think drinking and driving are serious problems in the community, with 59.7 percent saying that they had either driven a car after drinking or had ridden in a car with someone else who had been drinking. The survey also stated that 34.4 percent know an adult who has sponsored parties and allowed/provided alcohol to youth, 24 percent knew a store that sold tobacco or alcohol to minors and 7.8 percent knew a bar that served alcohol to minors.

When asked about their perceptions relating to law enforcement, 14.8 percent said law enforcement is doing a great job at keeping alcohol and other drugs away from youth, while 28.9 said no, 41.7 percent said sometimes and 14.5 said they didn't know. Forty-four percent said they didn't think community laws about illegal drug use and alcohol abuse are effective, 24 percent said the laws are effective and 32 percent said they didn't know.

A vast number of available resources were listed in the presentation where kids could go to seek help; for example, sports and recreational programs, bully prevention programs and many other resources. However, there are a few resources the county still lacks, such as at-risk youth programs, educational programs, family and youth programs, substance abuse prevention/treatment options, career training opportunities, more sports and recreational programs and other resources such as more stores and a movie theater.

In an email, McFarlin reminded coalition members that, "This data is a tool that is meant to be helpful not hurtful, and it is just part of the picture (not the whole picture)."

So, what's next for the coalition? Aaron said she is continuing to receive and gather more data from surrounding cities and towns in the county. More additional community surveys may be needed, along with possibly creating focus groups. During the process, one must consider the age of data, availability of data and the ability to collect the data in a timely manner.

"Our next step is going to be pinpointing an area of the county that we're going to focus the prevention [in], and which high school we're going to be in. That's the next step," Aaron said. "It's going to be in a high school predominantly, we just haven't pinpointed

which one, and that's going to be driven by the data; which one has the greatest need based on the information that we have.

“And, which community also has the resources so when we go into a community for prevention, we'll not only have what we're doing in the community but we'll also have community support.”

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