

BEAUFORT NEWS

Hilton Head Island group's fight against teen drinking gains momentum

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A Hilton Head Island alliance working to curb underage drinking and other risky behaviors is gaining steam with a new name, expert advisers and a charitable-organization designation.

Now, the Lowcountry Alliance for Healthy Youth is trying to grow its membership -- and its bank account -- to tackle the challenges of teen substance abuse in the fall.

The group, which has been meeting monthly at Hilton Head Island High School, was formed after a wreck killed 17-year-old Hilton Head Prep student Kendall Walton and injured four of her friends last year.

One of its founders, school board member Julie Bell, says the alliance is no longer just a "couple of mommies" brainstorming ways to stop teen parties.

"We wanted it to be bigger than a group of parents with a message of 'If you see something, say something,'" she said. "Where we are now is going out into the community and asking for support."

The alliance recently partnered with the Community Foundation of the Lowcountry, which will accept donations on its behalf. In addition to the 20 or 30 people who attend monthly meetings, the group is establishing a board of directors with the goal of including representatives from the legal, law enforcement, business and medical communities.

The group's first major project is a substance-use survey of all Hilton Head Island middle and high school students slated for the fall -- an effort that will identify problems local teens face and enable the alliance to pursue grants, Bell said.

Bell has permission from the district to hand out the survey, created by national organization Communities that Care, in public schools and is working to get permission from private schools on the island. Parents are allowed to opt their child out of the survey, she said.

Determining the needs is an important first step, said Dr. Loretta Novince, a developmental psychology professor at the University of Cincinnati who recently retired to Hilton Head.

In Ohio, Novince was involved with a similar, 30-year-old effort to fight youth substance abuse. On Thursday, she'll tell the Beaufort County group how to form an effective coalition.

"The goal of a coalition working to address substance use and abuse among youth needs to address the factors in the community that increase risk," Novince said. "With that, you also have to promote factors that minimize risk."

Group members hope Novince's expertise will help them educate teenagers about the detrimental effects of substance abuse, Bell said.

Group members have many other ideas, including printing decals that local businesses could hang in store windows pledging not to serve alcohol or nicotine products to minors, said Phyllis Neville.

They hope the results of the survey, more members and more donations will enable them to host anti-drinking events during next spring's graduation and prom seasons.

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