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Monroe Community Coalition restructures

By: Chris Hendrickson March 17, 2015 Monroe News News 854 Views

The Monroe Community Coalition paused last week, taking a few moments to absorb a recent decision made by Snohomish County that will necessitate transition within the organization's structure of leadership.

The group also took some time to celebrate a few of its accomplishments.

The coalition is a volunteer-driven nonprofit organization, dedicated to improving the health and wellness of the Monroe community by reducing underage drinking and substance use. The group works to identify risk factors that are indicative of underage drinking and drug use, and strives to mitigate those risk factors through direct service, outreach and public awareness.

Serving the youth

The group is funded through the Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative (CPWI), a grant-funded initiative administered via a contract with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery (DBHR). The goal of the initiative is to support evidence-based prevention strategies that are implemented by individual community coalitions like Monroe's.

Coalitions must have representation from a minimum of eight community sectors including health, law enforcement, education, youth, media, parents and more. The CPWI coalition funding is managed by a local fiscal agent, typically a government entity, such as a county government or an educational district, that is responsible for managing the funds in a way that satisfies the criteria specified in the DBHR contract.

Snohomish County has served as the Monroe coalition's fiscal agent since the organization was founded in July 2013, but recently made the decision to withdraw from the CPWI effective July 1. Since it will not be renewing the DBHR contract for CPWI funding, the Monroe group will need to seek an alternative fiscal agent and a new coalition coordinator.

Per the DBHR contract, each coalition must have a community coordinator, a position which has been filled by Snohomish County Prevention Coordinator Joe Neigel since the coalition was founded. In light of the county's decision to decline the DBHR prevention contract, a new coalition coordinator will be sought and appointed.

Identifying risks

As the county's prevention coordinator, Neigel's role is to reduce risk factors and facilitate programs and services that address underage drinking and drug use. In addition to Monroe, he has helped spearhead similar prevention coalitions in other communities, including Darrington and Sultan. During the coalition meeting on March 12, Neigel provided some context for the county's decision.

Prior to the implementation of the CPWI program, there was a strong prevention infrastructure that extended countywide, supported by abundant funding in various forms. Resources were distributed throughout the county as equally as possible, to locations that demonstrated the most intense need. With the onset of CPWI, the concentration of resources became more focused.

"CPWI marked a pretty radical shift in how the county did business. Rather than being able to respond to countywide needs, we really became focused in Darrington, Marysville and now Monroe," Neigel said. "In the meantime, it's meant saying 'No,' or 'We can't help you' to a lot of communities that are starting to express need."

Additionally, several funding sources have since been eliminated, causing shortfalls, resulting in the county's decision to broaden their focus to support constituents countywide. For Neigel, the news was bittersweet. While he supports the county's decision, he said that he's deeply regretful that it will mean he can no longer

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serve as the coalition coordinator in Monroe.

“For those of you who know me, it’s a hard pill to swallow,” Neigel said. “I love the work that I get to do with communities. I love Monroe; I mean, I live right up the road. The Sky Valley’s my home and it’s really been a unique pleasure of getting to serve here at home.”

Coalition members expressed disappointment about the upcoming change in leadership. Vice Chair Kerry Boone read a letter from Pastor Michael Hanford, who was unable to attend the meeting. Hanford represents the faith community, and often advocates for the coalition during city council meetings.

“Let me say that our coalition coordinator, Joe Neigel, is a rare leader who has been the glue and comprehensive expertise which has been instrumental in launching our very successful coalition,” Hanford wrote. “His training, experience, abilities, leadership and wisdom have been indispensable to our efforts here in Monroe.”

DBHR staff members were also in attendance at the meeting, and assured the group that the CPWI funding is intact, and that the state has every intention of helping them move forward as a coalition.

“This coalition is a leader in our system and you guys need to know that,” said DBHR Prevention System Manager Camille Goldy. “We have 52 communities that we work with in the CPWI project – and I am assistant manager and I work with eight of those – and I’m constantly referring to this coalition as a community that should be looked at for guidance.”

A successful model

Monroe’s coalition has been extremely effective, agreed Neigel, who was excited to share recently released data from the state’s Healthy Youth Survey. Every two years, sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th grade students from across the state participate in the anonymous survey, which includes questions relating to their health and substance use behaviors. The data is then assimilated and examined for trends.

In Monroe, data from the 2012 report suggested that community risk was heightened due to skewed community perception and parents ill-equipped to talk with their kids about substance use. As a result, the coalition zeroed in on changing perception and increasing parental awareness.

New data shows that the biggest change between 2012 and 2014 was with students who said they had permission to use alcohol at home. In 2012, 15 percent of Monroe students said that they were allowed to drink at home. In 2014, that number dropped to 4 percent.

“Basically, what this is telling us is that this change occurred beyond random chance,” Neigel said. “Something happened in this community to help parents talk with their kids about their expectations around alcohol.”

Another problem area was the perception that law enforcement would not enforce underage substance use laws. This area is critical, as research indicates that substance use typically goes up as the perceived risk from using substances goes down. In 2012, 80 percent of Monroe students believed that nothing would happen to them if they got caught using. That number has dropped to 72 percent.

Other findings included the number of students who believed that their parents didn’t care if they used substances and the number of youth who don’t think underage drinking is wrong.

“Now, it’s not a matter of ‘I hope we can make a difference.’ I’ve shown you that we have made a difference,” Neigel said. “The question for us as we go into the plan update and really looking at the data next month is, ‘How do we sustain this? How do we sustain this rate of change?’ Because this isn’t happening in other communities, this is happening here. You guys have accomplished something incredible.”

Next month, discussion will continue on locating a new fiscal agent and coalition coordinator. The group will also take a deeper look at the findings from the October 2014 Healthy Youth Survey and will be working on updating its strategic plan.

The group meets at 1 p.m. on the second Thursday of each month at the Monroe School District’s Administration Building.

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April 14, 2015 7:00 pm

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