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September 8, 2005

Palm Beach County Coalition Helps Turn Kids Into Peer Educators

For four days every summer, youth in Palm Beach County, Fla. attend a camp in Northern Florida where they learn kayaking, rappelling, land navigational skills—and how to keep their peers away from drugs. The camp is part of the Palm Beach County Substance Abuse Coalition's (PBCSAC) strategy to train teens how to become peer educators.

The teens are trained by the Florida National Guard, as part of an on-going partnership with the PBCSAC.

The program was launched three years ago after coalition leaders learned that the two highest risk factors for youth in their community were friends who engage in problem behavior and favorable attitudes toward problem behavior.

"Our two highest risk factors had to do with what our peers think about each other, so we needed something to counteract that," explained Doris Carroll, coalition coordinator. "And we knew that statistics show that youth will listen to other youth before they'll listen to me."

About 60 new or current high school students are recruited for the training program each year. Youth spend their days outside doing physically challenging activities that help build character and leadership skills. In the evening, participants learn in a classroom setting about the dangers of gateway drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana and tobacco, and about inhalants. Teens also learn to improve their public speaking skills through presentations.

Students who participate in the National Guard-sponsored training return to the community ready to be role models and peer educators. As part of the training, participants must pledge that they will remain drug-free and to teach 20 teens about the dangers of drugs. The coalition helps ensure that the youth stick to their commitment by booking speaking engagements for them at churches, after-school venues and country clubs.

Carroll said the biggest change you see in participants of the training is that they're not afraid to say they don't use drugs. "When it's time for them to peer educate, I tell them it's not as scary as repelling. If you can do that obstacle course, you can do this," she said.

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Little by little, after each training, the coalition hopes that they can change the misperception that “everybody is doing it”. “After you get done with something like this, other kids in the community see that there are kids committed to being drug free, so we’re changing the social norm,” Carroll said.

To learn more about the PBCSAC, visit www.pbcscac.org.

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