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Levy County Prevention Coalition shows progress and expansion



Levy County Prevention Coalition Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Lewis opens the meeting on Friday afternoon (Sept. 28) with positive news about the group's success.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 30, 2018 at 8:38 p.m.

WILLISTON – Levy County Prevention Coalition (LCPC) Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Lewis shared a wealth of information and astounding announcements of success for the organization at the Friday afternoon (Sept. 28) luncheon meeting.



As Levy County Prevention Coalition Chairman Crystal Seley (seated at left) watches, Jonathan Lewis holds up samples of football tickets and concession stand voucher the LCPC bought from Williston and Chiefland high schools for home football games. This is part of the methods for the LCPC to encourage students to participate in Friday Night Done Right activities.

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CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services Prevention Coordinator Gwen Love listens to a presentation Friday afternoon. Love and Robert Wells are among the founders of the 16-year-old Levy County Prevention Coalition.

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Jonathan Lewis holds up bags that can be used to deactivate as many as 90 pills at once. This makes it even easier for people to properly dispose of dangerous prescription drugs -- like pain pills -- they no longer need, but which present a hazard when left in medicine cabinets -- where people can take them.



Robert Wells (left) speaks about the All Stars Program that he is involved with and he shares insight with people about methods to learn more about mental health first aid. To the right in this photo is Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison, who was thanked for the ongoing support the school district has shown to the Levy County Prevention Coalition.

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Kristina Zachry invites everyone to the Oct. 9 meeting of the Levy County Tobacco Prevention Coalition and Quit Doc. (More details are on the Community Calendar.)

In addition to the excellent progress reports by Lewis, there were accounts conveyed by Kristina Zachry of Quit Doc, Robert Wells of both the LCPC and Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services Prevention Coordinator Gwen Love, Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison and Dr. Rosalind Hall, director of ESE and student services for the Levy County School District.

Also joining the group were three special agents of the Florida Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco (ABT).

The ABT is the Florida state government agency which licenses and regulates the sale of alcoholic beverages and tobacco. It is part of the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation.

And this all fit in within one hour, while participants dined on Chic-fil-A chicken wraps, chicken nuggets, various forms of Pringle chips and huge chocolate chip cookies, with tea to drink.

LCPC Chairman Crystal Seley opened the meeting with her inimitable grace and style, welcoming everyone.

From that glowing start, the meeting went as smooth as silk.

SUMMER CAMP

The LCPC this past summer, LCPC Chief Operating Officer Lewis said, provided a complete daytime summer camp. The coalition had completed smaller versions in previous summers, but this past summer, it went full-length.

This summer camp lasted all of June. Each day went every Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at Williston Elementary School. This fit in with the WES Summer Reading Camp that was part of the program.

Parents dropped off their children, Lewis said, and the students enjoyed breakfast and lunch at WES, as well as having fun at LCPC Summer Camp.

Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, the students enjoyed Summer Reading Camp in the mornings.

For the campers whose parents wanted, they could stay until 5:30 p.m. for LCPC Summer Camp on those three afternoons each week as well as the full days on Thursdays and Fridays.

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The children, ages 8 to 14, enjoyed movies at the Regency, swimming, archery, baking, arts and crafts, as well as skill-building activities. The LCPC Summer Camp of 2018 was named “Building Today’s Youth Summer Camp 2018.”

The 15 off-campus field trips included adventures at Otter Springs Park in Gilchrist County; a trip to Albert Fuller’s farm; the Regency Movie Theater; the Marion Movie Theater; as well as to Cedar Key and nature trails.

More than eight different organizations partnered with the LCPC this summer for the day camp. It was an enriching experience for the children, Lewis said.

On the last day of camp, it ended with a huge water balloon battle. Children used more than 1,500 water balloons. The one rule was that no balloons could be thrown in a person’s face, Lewis said, and everyone abided by that rule.

There is a plan to have this type of camp for the Summer of 2019. With help from the two Rotary Clubs in Chiefland, Lewis said, the LCPC may be able to bus Chiefland children to WES this summer to participate as well.

PREVENTION PARTNERSHIP GRANT

Lewis said the Prevention Partnership Grant (PPG) from the state of Florida was written in conjunction with the CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services group of Gainesville.

The LCPC was one of six agencies awarded in the Northeast Florida Region, Lewis said.

This grant allows LCPC to expand the Too Good For Drugs and the Too Good For Violence programs to Cedar Key School and Yankeetown School, Lewis said, meaning that every public school student in Levy County for the age group for those programs will now receive them.

Students in schools throughout Levy County will receive these programs once a week, every week of the school year, Lewis said.

NATURAL HIGH CAMPAIGN

Part of the Too Good For Drugs education includes the Natural High Campaign.

The idea here is for people to ask themselves what they find as something they feel passionate about.

“What’s your purpose? How do you define yourself?”

With these and some other questions as starting points, the participants can determine how to spend their time, talents and the gifts they have in their lives.

In general, students may find sports, music, hunting, fishing and other things are what drives them to have “a natural high” and that alcohol or other drugs are not needed for that.

MENTORING PROGRAM

Another LCPC program is the “Building Today’s Youth” mentoring program.

Lewis said there were 106 students in the mentoring program last year. Mentors saw their young persons at least twice a week for 20 minutes each time.

The LCPC monitored academic and behavioral records.

Mentors provided guidance, academic tutoring and help with building basic social and emotional skills.

The plan now is to expand this to Bronson, Cedar Key and Chiefland schools, Lewis said.

As a conclusion of the first half of the school year last year, participants built gingerbread houses and made cookies before the winter break, Lewis said. This was with assistance from the Food Nutrition Department of the Levy County School System, Lewis said.

A formal dinner is planned for spring, Lewis said, where youths can demonstrate they have learned proper etiquette and table manners.

FRIDAY NIGHT DONE RIGHT

The Friday Night Done Right Campaign, Lewis said, encourages youth to do Friday night the way –

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without using alcohol or other drugs.

By giving students free tickets to football games, Lewis said, this is a method to help build the concept of doing Friday night right. Included with this are vouchers for use at the concession stand, he added, to help them have an enjoyable Friday night.

Youth who want to participate fill in cards at the games, and 10 to 20 are selected for free tickets to the next game, Lewis said.

This program is happening now in Williston and Chiefland, and it is hoped to have Bronson in the mix soon as well, Lewis said.

DRUG FREE COMMUNITIES GRANT

With the end of September, it ends the previous five-year Drug Free Communities Grant (DFCG), Lewis said.

The Levy County Prevention Coalition has been approved for another DFCG for years six through 10, he said.

Five years ago, when the LCPC applied for the grant, it did so with underwriting by CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services, Lewis said. Now the LCPC has achieved its 5013c status, this new grant on its own.

Lewis said he is most appreciative of CDS Prevention Coordinator Gwen Love for her help during the past five years with this grant. Love was among the founders of the LCPC with Robert Wells, who is the LCPC treasurer this year.

The first LCPC founders created the group 16 years ago, Wells said. Love encouraged him to never surrender, he said, even though there were times when he was tempted to give up.

Wells also has been instrumental in the Dixie County Anti-Drug Coalition and with the recently-started Gilchrist (County) Anti-Drug Coalition.

PRESCRIPTION DRUG DROP-OFFS

Lewis said the LCPC has a new addition to the United States Drug Enforcement Agency's Prescription Drug Drop-Off Program.

The LCPC has special drug-deactivation bags now that are planned to be available in the near future. One bag can dispose of up to 90 pills, he said.

The person puts water in the bag, pours in the pills, seals it, shakes it and then, Lewis said, the neutralized pills can be discarded with household garbage.

The goal is to reduce the amount of unused medications that young people may take from medicine cabinets of parents, grandparents or other individuals, Lewis said.

RESPONSIBLE VENDOR TRAINING

The LCPC has provided Responsible Vendor Training (RVT) in person to people for five years now. Lewis said this will continue.

There is the potential to add a more efficient method for convenience store owners, retail outlet owners, bar owners, and restaurateurs and other places where tobacco and alcohol are sold to know best management practices to prevent sales of certain items to minors.

The RVT training may be able to be shared via a laptop, Lewis said, and this is a method the LCPC may offer to business owners in the near future, as well as to have live training.

Liability insurance rates may be reduced, he said, for outlets that have all of their staff who sell tobacco and alcohol trained and certified.

OTHER NEWS

Meridian Behavioral Healthcare had a good contingent at the LCPC meeting, beyond Robert Wells.

Dr. Joe Munson, the vice president of prevention and community education for Meridian was present, as was Rick Wagner, a grant coordinator for a possible jail diversion program in the future for Levy County. This would be for people with drug problems, he said.

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Kristina Zachry of Quit Doc said there are six teams of Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) in the Levy County schools this year.

There were 200 students at the initial recruitment meetings this year for SWAT, Zachry said.

There are new signs being printed for the campuses in Levy County, Zachry said, thanks to the assistance of the Levy County School Board and Superintendent of Schools Edison.

Each school will have their school colors and their mascots. Superintendent of Schools Edison joked that creating the one for the Yankeetown School Sand Gnats was a challenge.

Zachry mentioned that he knew signs help everyone understand the School Board's choice to include electronic cigarettes to the list of prohibited tobacco products on Levy County School Board properties.

Zachry also mentioned the next meeting of the Levy County Tobacco Free Partnership is set for Oct. 9 at 3:30 p.m. in Chiefland at the Capital City Bank, 2012 N. Young Blvd. U.S. Highway 19) in the bank's community meeting room.

This is a great opportunity to become more involved in tobacco control in the community for youth and adults, she said.

Everyone is welcome, she said. (Please RSVP to KZachry@QuitDoc.com if you plan to attend so that Zachry will have an accurate count for refreshments.

Dr. Munson from Meridian said this organization is able to work with any schools, faith-based groups, law enforcement agencies or other organization for mental health first aid training.

Meridian has a new ropes course instructor who is planning on being certified in November. That course is in Gainesville, but it is a method available for use in team-building and other aspects of strengthening positive behavior.

To learn more about Meridian, please visit the website at <https://www.mbhci.org/>. Meridian has a 24-hour crisis line available at 352-374-5600.

In regard to mental health, Superintendent of Schools Edison said he advocates preventative measures because it is easier to head off small issues rather than to have to deal with big issues.

The district is looking with a more holistic view now at mental health and substance abuse issues, Edison said.

He let Dr. Hall speak about progress this year in that regard in the Levy County School District.

Student Services Director Hall said the district has hired a districtwide psychologist named Dr. Leila Pratt.

Dr. Pratt has a caseload currently, Dr. Hall said, of 48 students.

There have been some number of Levy County students who have been committed involuntarily for hospitalization due to mental health issues where they show enough of an inclination to hurt themselves or others, that professional help is vital.

To find the root cause of these mental health and behavioral issues, Dr. Hall said, takes an intentional direction of energy and other resources across the whole spectrum of the community.

Transportation is a cause, she said, for some parents to not be able to be at scheduled meetings. With this as an issue, she added, "We need to meet parents where they are."

School is a safe place to be, Dr. Hall said, and building trust with children and their families is a key to making the community more mentally healthy.