



Kane County Health Department Hosts Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health

February 28, 2020 - The Kane County Health Department (KCHD) partnered with the Kane County Regional Office of Education and local school districts to host a “Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health” on February 21st at Geneva High School. Seventy students from eight different high schools across Kane County attended and shared their opinions about existing mental health services and what additional supports are needed for youth. Dundee-Crown High School, Elgin High School, Larkin High School, Dream Academy, South Elgin High School, Batavia High School, Central High School, and Geneva High School all participated.

This was the first youth focused event hosted by the Kane County System of Care since the Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation awarded a seven year, 2.3 million dollar grant to the Kane County Health Department.

Kate McCormack, LCSW, Community Health Initiatives Coordinator at KCHD spearheaded the organization of the event. “I was amazed at the dedication of the school staff and administrators who took on the extra work of organizing their students and bringing them to the Forum,” she said. “I was also inspired by the bravery of the students in sharing their stories and by their visions for improved mental health services.”

The event consisted of a panel discussion featuring State Representative Karina Villa of the 49th district, Dr. Eric Nolan, MD, Psychiatry, of Creekwood Associates, Kelly Hesselbaum, LCSW, from Geneva High School, and Hannah Kramer, LSW, therapist from TriCity Family Services. The panelists answered student questions related to mental health, including how to get help for a friend, how to talk with parents about their mental health, and how they can advocate for themselves in their schools and in the community. Representative Villa encouraged students to express their opinions to elected officials because hearing directly from youth is powerful.

(more)

Kane County Health Department Hosts Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health – page 2

Students participated in breakout sessions and offered their opinions on what supports and services are helpful and what isn't working. Students stated that the mental health services that exist, such as one on one conversations with school social workers and counselors, as well as 504 plans, are helpful, but they overwhelmingly wished that they had more time with these trusted professionals. They were also interested in other non-traditional forms of support such as yoga, therapy dogs, and peer mentors.

Josh Axelsen, of the Regional Office of Education explained, "I believe having meaningful student involvement will be imperative to improving our current system of care for youth mental health."

Mary Abbott, LCSW, and lead social worker for school district U-46, described her students' reactions to the Forum, "Our students who attended this event overwhelming expressed that they wished the event would have lasted longer and hope to attend a similar event again. So many of them left feeling validated and connected. Some said it was so good to not feel alone with their mental health struggles." She went on to explain that some students even felt inspired to organize their own event where they can educate others about the struggles that come with a mental health diagnosis. "It was such an awesome and well organized event that allowed students a safe space to express their needs and feelings," she said.

Engaging youth is a critical component of the Kane County System of Care initiative to improve children's mental health. A System of Care is defined as a comprehensive spectrum of mental health and other necessary services which are organized into a coordinated network to meet the multiple and changing needs of children and their families. A key principle of implementing a System of Care approach increases collaboration between child and family serving organizations and bringing families and youth to the table as equal partners in their care. The Kane County System of Care will continue to work collaboratively with students and school districts to implement some of the student's ideas and continue to lift Youth Voices for Mental Health.

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Kane County Health Department Hosts Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health – page 3

The Kane County Health Department is an active participant in the Kane County Behavioral Health Council. For more information, see KaneHealth.com/Pages/Behavioral-Health.aspx

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Contact: Susan Stack 630-444-3098

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