

Be Aware 5K for suicide prevention goes virtual

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The Be Aware 5K for Youth Suicide Prevention hosted by the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families and KnowResolve Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention has gone virtual this year. Pictured are students in the coalition's Chippewa Valley High School Coalition Teen Council at last year's in-person Be Aware 5K.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLENE MCGUNN

Combating mental health issues such as depression or suicide and fighting a war on substance abuse have become more critical in a COVID-19 world, and the Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families is thinking outside the box to carry on with these core missions.

"Everything that we are doing at this point needs to be conducted within the current reality, and yet it is really important to not step back from all of these efforts, particularly when we are at a point in time in which it is generally acknowledged, that it is very difficult for families. It is very difficult for youth," Coalition Executive Director Charlene McGunn said. She added that the coalition is aware of the need for prevention due to the close connection of mental health issues and early substance abuse.

One major project that the coalition has re-imagined is its annual walk for youth suicide prevention, held in conjunction with KnowResolve Youth Suicide Awareness Prevention. The Be Aware 5K will be held virtually, allowing walkers to participate from anywhere, such as at a park, in a neighborhood or on a treadmill. Participants are asked to do the 5K between Oct. 17-24. McGunn said that the 5K can be completed intermittently or on one day.

“The focus of that is to remind parents and the school community about issues related to youth suicide and the need for prevention strategies,” McGunn said. “Our youth are heavily involved in that program. Normally it is outside, it would be walking at Dakota. But this year it will be a virtual event.”

Cost to register is \$25 and includes a T-shirt. Registration is now open and can be found at charity.gofundme.com/o/en/campaign/beaware2020.

The walk will financially support the local youth suicide awareness and prevention programs of KnowResolve and Chippewa Valley Coalition for Youth and Families. KnowResolve is a non-profit organization based in Shelby Township. It is dedicated to promoting mental health and preventing youth suicides through outreach, advocacy and education. The coalition develops school and community partnerships to promote healthy, resilient, and drug free youth, and to prevent youth suicides.

The coalition hosted its first full membership meeting of the new school year on Sept. 15 at 3:30 p.m. The virtual meeting included 50 people as a representation of membership, and was intended primarily as a meeting to plan for the school year, McGunn said. Altogether, the coalition has about 90 adult members and 120 youth members who participate in Coalition Teen Councils at the Chippewa Valley Schools district high schools of Dakota High School in Macomb Township and Chippewa Valley High in Clinton Township. As of Sept. 23, the district was in remote learning.

“It is a broad range representing school staff, community agencies serving youth, health care, law enforcement, a broad sweep of the community,” McGunn said.

In addition to discussing the 5K at the Sept. 15 meeting, the coalition began planning to offer its annual Red Ribbon campaign in a more virtual way. Red Ribbon Week will be held Oct. 19-23.

“We partner with the DEA – Drug Enforcement Administration – to conduct a broad range of programming, typically in the elementary and middle schools as well as some efforts in the high school,” McGunn said.

McGunn said she anticipates bringing resolutions declaring Red Ribbon Week to the boards of trustees for Clinton and Macomb townships, as well as the Chippewa Valley Schools Board of Education.

“We hope to raise awareness of the dangers of alcohol, marijuana, vaping and other drug use for youth,” McGunn said.

A social media campaign and videos will be important to this year’s Red Ribbon campaign. McGunn said that some of the coalition’s videos would be picked up nationally by the DEA.

“We will be providing teachers, school staff with videos and materials. We hope to create an online system for parents and students from all of the elementary and middle schools to interact and discuss dangers of drugs. We will look at this as primarily an awareness raising for parents and as an informational opportunity for kids,” McGunn said. “What we really know is prevention needs to start very early.”

The week of July 6, the coalition launched a Raising Resilient Children/Teens...Even During Difficult Times Facebook campaign at facebook.com/cvcoalition.org. Each week during the summer, two Facebook posts were offered containing research-based practical tips to promote resiliency. McGunn said that the coalition is looking at continuing this program in a different format, creating short research-based videos. The coalition also provides a list of COVID-19 related resources on the district’s website chippewavalleyschools.org to help families.