Partners bring mental health checkups to local schools

What do lead poisoning tests, oral health checks, scoliosis screenings, hearing tests, and vision exams have in common? Answer: they often take place in or for schools.

When it comes to mental health, however, a systematic approach to identifying problems has been less common in Iowa schools, at least historically. Whether this is because of a lack of mental health literacy among parents and teachers, or the stigma that accompanies mental health issues, public health and community partners in North Central Iowa are trying to increase mental health screenings in area schools. Their tool for doing so is TeenScreen Schools and Communities, a program designed to facilitate mental health checkups of youth ages 11 to 18.

History

2005 was a bad year for North Central Iowa. That year, 21 people died of suicide in Cerro Gordo County and six neighboring counties. Among them, one-third were under 23 years of age. "We were saddened by all of these deaths but especially those of young people," said Mark Dodd, clinical director at Prairie Ridge Addiction Treatment Services in Mason City,

A community partnership formed and eventually recommended that mental health checkups be offered to area youth, specifically using the TeenScreen program. "Due to the shared efforts between community providers and the five school districts that had shown an interest, we were able to bring

For every suicide death, an estimated 32 teens (15-19 yrs of age) are treated in emergency rooms for injuries that resulted from a suicide attempt.

Source: National Electronic Injury Surveillance System

in a TeenScreen program trainer from New York City to help us use the new tool," Dodd said. "This immediately said something about our program, as it's more common to send a project representative away for this kind of training."

How it works

The TeenScreen program requires parental and student consent prior to screening. Step one of the screening process involves filling out a 10-minute questionnaire about vision, hearing and dental problems, symptoms of anxiety and depression, suicidal thinking and behavior, and use of drugs and alcohol.

Should this step reveal a potential problem or result in a request for help, the teen is offered a private meeting with a mental health professional to determine if further evaluation would be helpful. If that is the case, parents are then contacted by TeenScreen staff to discuss ways they can get help for their teen.

Success helps expand program

"It's crucial to have parents engaged when a community implements the TeenScreen program," Dodd said. "Earning their trust early on makes it easier

Continued on back.

to recommend follow-up evaluations, helps establish the program within the community, and allows smooth transition into neighboring communities."

And Dodd's leadership has done just that. With screening now taking place in 10 schools in North Central Iowa, of the 813 youth offered screening last year, 452 parents (56 percent) consented to have their son or daughter screened. That's more than double the 23 percent consent rate the program experiences nationwide. "Among those we screened, we were thankfully able to refer nearly 50 students for further evaluation, possibly saving some lives in the process," Dodd added.

Dodd encourages other community partnerships, schools, and parents to remember some key facts when considering the importance of supporting the mental health of young people in their community. Those include:

- In the U.S., 4 million youth suffer from a serious mental disorder that causes significant functional impairments at home, at school, and with peers;
- Twenty-one percent of children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder that causes at least minimal impairment;
- Half of all mood, anxiety, impulse-control and substance-use disorders start by age 14; and
- Unfortunately, only 20 percent of children with mental disorders are identified and receive mental health services.

Another TeenScreen Success Story

Through an IDPH grant, TeenScreen Program Coordinator Sharon Yearous was able to grow and expand the TeenScreen program in Eastern Iowa and Cedar Rapids. She created the Mobile Mental Health Screening Program, through which a trained screening team travels from school to school with screening questionnaires loaded on laptop computers. "By being mobile, we're able to offer more teens the opportunity for a mental health checkup," Yearous said.

Assisted by funds through grants administered by the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) Division of Behavioral Health, the United Way of North Central Iowa is the recipient and fiscal agent for the TeenScreen program in their area. IDPH supports them and six other programs in 48 sites across the state through funding from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Iowa has a total of 65 TeenScreen sites—the 3rd largest number in the country. For more information, visit www.idph.state.ia.us/bh/suicide_prevention.asp or call Suicide Prevention Coordinator Dale Chell at (515) 242-5122.