

New NOPE Chapter: Okeechobee County

The chapter in a rural Florida county will educate all of the area's middle school and high school students about the dangers of abusing drugs.

By Leon Fooksman



Okeechobee County is a sleepy agricultural community at the upper lip of Lake Okeechobee in Central Florida, a world away from the big city problems associated with the nation's drug abuse epidemic.

But even there, in a landscape dotted with pastoral farms and cattle ranches, young people have not been spared the tragedies resulting from mixing dangerous prescription pills with other drugs. At least five youth have died of drug overdoses in recent years.

So when Frank Whiting, a seasoned drug abuse counselor, learned several years ago about NOPE Task Force's anti-drug school presentations, he reached out to Okeechobee County's top school administrators, law enforcement officials, and child advocates to find a way to bring the program to the area.

"We didn't know what to do about educating our youth," said Whiting, director of Okeechobee County Substance Abuse Coalition. "We needed to get the attention of the students."

In February, the program will officially start. The Okeechobee chapter of NOPE (Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education) has formed, and plans are underway to do the presentations in all the

county's public middle and high schools. Okeechobee is NOPE's eighth chapter in Florida and California.

At the NOPE presentations, police officers, grieving parents, drug counselors, and other anti-drug advocates share the stage in telling students about the dangers of trying painkillers like methadone, even once. They also stress calling 911 or an adult if a friend is found unresponsive following drug usage.

Like many other places across the country, Okeechobee County youths are using illicit drugs and abusing prescription pills. In a survey of 72,797 middle and high school students, nearly 52 percent said they have used alcohol on at least one occasion in their lives, according to the 2010 Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey. Another 24 percent indicated they tried marijuana. And 7 percent took prescription pain relievers to get high.



“The new program will reach the right population,” said Whiting, who also works as a drug prevention/intervention case manager for Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office.

Whiting first saw a NOPE presentation at the former Eagle Academy, a boot-camp style program for troubled youth run by the Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office. He then helped organize a NOPE presentation at the Okeechobee Freshman Campus middle school in his home county last year.

“The presentation went over really well. I had an overwhelming response from the school board, students, and so many others who were coming over to me,” he said.

Funding for the new chapter began lining up shortly after the presentation, with Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office and Children's Services Council of Okeechobee County providing the seed money. After that, two deputies, two parents and other volunteers committed to speaking at the presentations. Organizers also made shirts, banners – and even a float for an upcoming Christmas parade.

Whiting hopes that once the school presentations are launched, presentations can be set up for parents as well.

“What we found is that the students come home after watching these presentations in school and they're telling their parents to get rid of the unused prescription medicines. And the parents don't understand what they are talking about,” he said.

“Many parents today just don't know what this is all about.”

For more information about the NOPE Okeechobee chapter, contact the organization at: nopetaskforce.org/contact.php

If you value NOPE Task Force's commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a financial contribution to support the organization. Donate at ww.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp

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