SAFE working to prevent youth opioid abuse

Over the past 18 months, the SAFE in Northern Michigan Coalition has worked with many community partners to prevent youth opioid abuse in Northern Michigan.

After recognizing youth opioid and prescription drug abuse as an emerging trend in the area, the SAFE Coalition partnered with organizations like Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Drop Off (POD) workgroup, local schools, pharmacies, law enforcement, parents, physicians and other youth to provide an environment in which youth become more knowledgeable about the risks of prescription drug abuse and have less access to prescription drugs and opioids.

Nichole Flickema, community health coordinator for the Health Department of Northwest Michigan acknowledged that “we know many teens are accessing these medications in a medicine cabinet,” highlighting the need for enhanced education not only for young people, but also adults, who might not realize their legitimate medications could be getting in the wrong hands.

Efforts of the collaborators focused on providing education, reducing access, and changing policy. Grantees provided education to parents and middle and high-school students about the danger of prescription drugs and training for health care providers on opioid prescribing practices. They encouraged reduced access by

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distributing prescription drug abuse information through locally-owned pharmacies, coordinating additional prescription drop-off locations, hosting drug drop-off events and encourage pharmacies to participate in the MedSafe program, a disposal program for pharmacies. They worked to change policy by maintaining and expanding prescription drug drop-off locations, providing lock boxes to community members to allow for safe storage of prescription drugs in the home, and collaborating with school districts to ensure the availability of naloxone and adoption of relevant policy language at local middle and high schools.

“We know that it takes a whole community effort to overcome youth opioid abuse and we’re grateful for our community partners,” said Flickema.

This project is supported by a collaboration of funders: Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, BCBSM Foundation, the Michigan Health Endowment Fund, the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan and the Superior Health Foundation.

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is mandated by the Michigan Public Health Code to promote wellness, prevent disease, provide quality healthcare, address health problems of vulnerable populations, and protect the environment for the residents and visitors of Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Otsego counties.

For additional information about this project or youth opioid abuse, call Erin Luckhardt at 231-347-5628 or visit SAFEinNM.com or www.nwhealth.org.