

Upper Bucks Healthy Communities Healthy Youth Coalition

By focusing on positive youth development, supporting programs, and strengthening community relationships, the Upper Bucks Healthy Communities Healthy Youth Coalition has made significant progress in reducing youth substance use. Since 2004, the Upper Bucks Coalition, a Drug-Free Communities (DFC) grantee in Pennsylvania, has seen a 15 percent reduction in tobacco use among 12th graders, a 5 percent decrease in alcohol use among 10th graders, and a 44 percent reduction in tobacco use among 8th graders. The coalition has involved representatives from throughout the community to work collectively to implement successful drug prevention strategies.

This year, the coalition launched a social norms marketing campaign in one middle school and three high schools. The goal of the campaign is to inform youth and parents that the majority of teenagers in Upper Bucks choose *not* to drink. In fact, a survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders combined found that two out of three had not used alcohol in the last 30 days. The social norms campaign addresses the reality that the majority of youth over estimate how many of their peers engage in underage drinking. The coalition recruited 65 youth from 3 high schools to form what they call the “Street Team” to help plan and implement the project. Additionally, local businesses donated services and products to the campaign.

The students launched the first phase of the campaign in the opening weeks of the school year by passing out thousands of small green buttons with the letters “OMG.” OMG is commonly used by youth in electronic text messaging as an expression of surprise or joy or as a call to pay attention. The buttons developed a buzz of curiosity in the school. In phase two of the campaign, the students distributed 300 T-shirts and 5,000 static cling decals with the phrase “2outta3.” Finally, the entire message was revealed through the dissemination of 1,150 T-shirts and 5,000 silicone wrist bands with the message, “2outta3 Don’t Drink.” To reinforce the message, the coalition has printed news releases, newspaper articles, and newsletters. Research has shown that the strategy of using a social norms message is effective in reducing the rate of underage drinking and changing the perceptions of youth and adults.

The Upper Bucks Coalition has also involved youth sports leagues in their efforts to reduce substance use. Local coaches have attended Positive Coaching Alliance workshops called Double Goal Coach. The workshops are designed to train coaches of youth ages 8–18 on integrating positive youth development strategies as part of their coaching. Targeting this profession is important because youth sports organizations are second only to educational institutions as the segment of a community that can impact youth development.

Additionally, many youth drop out of organized sports around the age of 12, which coincidentally is the same time many young people begin to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. By teaching coaches to mentor and lead young people more effectively, the coalition is increasing the likelihood that this effort will decrease youth risk factors and increase protective factors in the Upper Bucks community.

The business community has taken a lead in the Upper Bucks coalition. US Restaurants, the area Burger King franchisee, has raised more than \$3 million since 1985 in support of Project CARE, a coalition founding member. Since US Restaurants learned that youth were selling drugs outside of the Quakertown Burger King in the mid-1980s, Burger King Restaurants in the area have been selling fund-raising coupon sheets. The president of the restaurant chain realized he had to get involved, and the company became committed to supporting Project CARE. Project CARE has trained more than 20,000 adults working with young people in schools and communities and has awarded higher education scholarships to students formerly in crisis because of alcohol and other drug or mental health issues.

Lee Rush, the Upper Bucks Coalition Community Organizer, says that “the coalition strategy is working in their community. Youth substance use is declining, a result of the support and collaboration with area schools, youth-serving organizations, faith-based and community organizations, government agencies, business partners, parents, youth, and community members. Through these partnerships, the community has worked together to support youth.”