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Upper Bucks health coalition awarded \$100,000 grant

By Jane Thompson-Smith
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The Upper Bucks Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth Coalition has been awarded federal support in the form of a five-year Drug-Free Communities grant, and will receive \$100,000 the first year.

The coalition is one of six such groups in the state to receive federal grant money.

The awards were announced Thursday at a news conference at Norristown High School. Highlighting the speakers at the conference were John P. Walters, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy in Washington, D.C., and U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter.

The coalition's goal is to promote the developmental assets, or building blocks, that are key in the development of youth. According to the coalition, the more assets youth have, the more likely they will grow up happy and healthy.

The coalition also measures risk factors, such as alcohol and drug use, and attempts to lessen their likelihood through community mobilization.

Walters, who coordinates all aspects of federal drug programs and spending, noted that of the billions of dollars the government spends on drug control, the vast majority of the money is sent back to the states and municipalities.

"You do the work," he said. "We know that."

Walters said the federal government knows that coalitions like the one in Upper Bucks are the ones that do the prevention, treatment and intervention, and work to keep communities safe, and strengthen the things that protect young people from the destructiveness of substance abuse. "If we are going to be effective, we have to successfully collaborate with you," he said.

Specter, taking a break from campaigning to lend his support to the coalitions' efforts, said an ounce of prevention is a pound of cure, and one dollar spent on substance abuse prevention will eliminate the need for greater expense later.

Lee Rush, executive director of just-Community Inc., which facilitates the coalition, said that receiving the grant is all part of the evolution of the group.

In 1999, the LifeQuest Foundation awarded the initiative with a three-year, \$170,000 startup and operating grant. In 2002, a three-year state grant was attained, with \$105,000 going to Quakertown and another \$105,000 designated for Pennridge. The two are joined now as part of the Upper Bucks Coalition, and Palisades is planning to become a member this summer.

The Upper Bucks coalition plans to use the money it receives to expand the

Upper Bucks Parenting Center, formerly known as the Quakertown Parenting Center. The center will serve Quakertown, Pennridge and Palisades areas. The money also will pay for hosting an Upper Bucks Youth Summit in the spring. Public and private school students will hold a town meeting with key community leaders such as elected officials, school board members and sports associations.

The coalition was instrumental in bringing B.I.G.S., a Big Brothers, Big Sisters mentoring program, to Quakertown and Pennridge school districts.

It also initiated the parenting program, Guiding Good Choices, as well as Supporting School Success, a K-3 program that helps parents improve their children's schoolwork. Project Alert, a research-based drug and alcohol program for sixth- and seventh-graders, also is being used at Pennridge thanks to the coalition, along with Tobacco Education Group Tobacco Awareness Program programs. Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth publishes a yearly Safe Homes Directory that lists homes in the community that don't allow drugs and alcohol, and facilitates restorative justice practices.

Restorative justice is a victim-driven program that brings the offender and the offended together.

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