



Hernando County antidrug organization named national Coalition of the Year

By Beth N. Gray, Times Correspondent

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At a small office in a modest strip plaza off Spring Hill Drive, one wouldn't expect to find the nation's best of, well, anything. But therein operates the Hernando County Community Anti-Drug Coalition, recently named Coalition of the Year by the 5,000-affiliate Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America.

"It's huge for a community like us to get this award. It's more likely Atlanta or Detroit or another large city," said Tresa Watson, executive director of the Hernando coalition. "People are (now) calling us wanting to know where is Hernando County."

While the coalition works with a number of high-profile partner agencies and institutions countywide, Watson acknowledges the coalition isn't a household name.

"Substance abuse work is not glamorous. Tobacco abuse work is not glamorous," she said. "A lot of people really don't like to talk about drugs and alcohol."

Nonetheless, the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, based in Alexandria, Va., in selecting the local nonprofit agency from among some 20 applicants noted in particular the unit's "success in addressing alcohol, tobacco and prescription drug use among middle and high school students in Hernando County."

Strategies, programs and projects were launched with the Hernando County Sheriff's Office, the Brooksville Police Department, the county school district, the county Health Department, BayCare Behavioral Health, Crescent Community Clinic, the WestBridge treatment center, community organizations and individuals. The strategies, programs and projects have included:

- A Know the Law course, which provides instruction regarding the laws surrounding drugs and alcohol and the consequences of breaking those laws. The course has reached 13,059 teens and parents since 2012 via schools, Teen Court and the local YMCA. "It's done so well," Watson observed, "it's been put into regional programs."
- Responsible Retailers, a training course chosen by 150 retailers since 2010 in lieu of arrest for selling alcohol to minors, the result of quarterly checks by law enforcement officers. The program has provided retailers with 6,000 "We ID" cling messages and 300 posters aimed at increasing awareness.
- No One's House, a new campaign via media and billboards launched in July that aims to make parents and other adults aware that it's unlawful to take car keys away from teens and allow them to drink in their house. "If parents are cited, we want them to go to a diversion program rather than arrest," Watson said.
- Lock It Up, a program that offers lock boxes for prescription medications and addresses "the prescription drug epidemic we're getting a handle on," Watson said. The boxes are going mostly to grandparents raising grandchildren and seniors visited by youngsters and teens, the elders being the more likely to be taking restricted medicines. Another effort provides convenient disposal of unused drugs via Sheriff's Office public collections.
- Friday Night Done Right, the coalition's response to young people's lament of "nothing to do here." At the Hernando County Family YMCA, the Y and the coalition have offered sports-oriented wholesome events the first Friday night of each

month since 2013, attracting a total of 5,808 participants. The coalition has provided resources for similar events staged at several schools. Arts and crafts are being added to the programs in 2016.

- Be Above Bullying, a two-day intensive program with an anti-drug component that will be launched soon at Fox Chapel Middle School — proposed by the school resource officer and presented by 30 lecturers and demonstrators. Funding comes from a grant obtained by the coalition. Depending on an after-program evaluation by participants, it may be extended to additional schools, Watson said.

Most of the funding for the coalition's efforts has come from a \$125,000 annual Drug Free Communities federal grant, now in its seventh year.

Some of the programs have been initiated by the coalition, with others purchased from vendors.

"When we've bought campaigns," Watson said, "we've brought 30 kids together to tell us what they like, so we'll know if we should use them."

"We just want a safe and healthy community," she said.

Local coalition representatives will receive the Coalition of the Year award at the Coalitions of America's National Leadership Forum, Feb. 1-4 in suburban Washington, D.C. To compete in the Got Outcomes! awards program, the local agency completed a rigorous application process that showed how it successfully engaged coalition partners and community members in developing and carrying out creative changes in programs, policies and practices based on local data.

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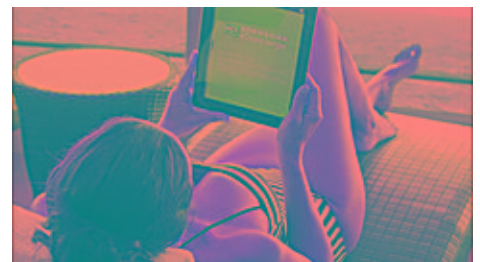
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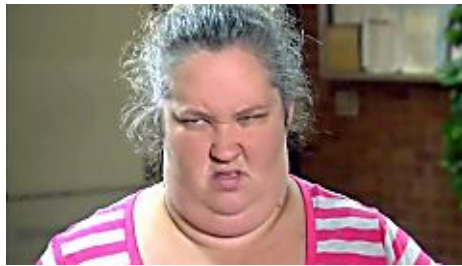
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