

Bennington, Hoosick Falls awarded DFC grant to tackle substance abuse

By Tom Momberg

Alliance for Community Transformations and the Hoosick Armory Youth Center and Community Coalition announced their joint award of a \$75,000 federal Drug-Free Communities Support Program grant this week.

The one-year term grant will be used to organize collaboration and research before applying for a larger DFC grant that will be used to address the multifaceted drug abuse issues in the community.

Organizations in Troy, N.Y. attained DFC Support Program funding in 2013, to fight drug abuse through community collaboration and youth programming. That previous two-year \$150,000 grant was actually used by HAYC3 to mentor those partners in Troy to involve and engage the community to prevent substance abuse among that city's young people.

"In the years since HAYC3 first received our award, the greater-Hoosick region has become stronger, more vibrant and is undergoing major revitalization," said HAYC3 Executive Director Aelish Nealon. "By focusing on the needs of our community and placing voices and ideas of every decision we make, schools, community leaders, nonprofits and other organizations are better able to work toward creating a future that supports our youth."

Now having successfully implemented sustainable programming and community coalitions in the greater Troy area, HAYC3 and ACT are hoping to address the same issues had among the Hoosick and Bennington communities with the most recent mentoring-coalition grant.

The two community coalition nonprofits have an established relationships, and have collaborated on such community-based drug prevention strategies such as the "In Our Own Backyard" town hall meetings earlier in 2014.

"The issues that the greater-Bennington region faces regarding alcohol, tobacco and substance abuse are the same as those in the greater-Hoosick region, with shared challenges and experiences," said Vermont Rep. Kiah Morris, also the director of ACT. "The awarding of these funds validates our belief that we are all in this together."

Now, ACT and HAYC3 will be able to set more concrete goals in their respective communities, as the DFC grants are renewed based on data-driven evidence and community partnership that prove strategies as attainable and within the reach of success.

Morris said that the bid for DFC grants is competitive, but that "it's no surprise that Bennington has the attention at the federal level, as a place with substance abuse issues."

ACT and HAYC3 began writing for the \$75,000 grant in October. Now that it has been awarded, the two nonprofit organizations will facilitate a number of community-based focus groups; collect data; coordinate efforts between other community organizations; allot two 2015 scholarships to local high school students to develop social media and youth outreach strategies;

hire a professional evaluator; and begin writing for the larger \$150,000 DFC grant, to implement strategies based on the findings.

The grant is renewable every consecutive year for up to 10 years, upon a successful review process after five years.

The DFC Support Program was created by the Drug-Free Communities Act of 1997. The grants are administered by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, which has awarded nearly 2,000 DFC grants to communities in all 50 states since its inception.

"DFC is asking us to look with a much wider scope than we have in the past," Morris said. "There are still issues that need to be resolved, and I think this will give us the tools needed to address them."

ACT, the community-based grassroots coalition, will establish collaboration, as well as a business plan with the town of Bennington, to figure out who in the community is underserved, or doesn't have access to youth activities or drug-support programming. The second-wave of grants will put in place what DFC has seen work in other communities, to address those gaps. ACT is primarily funded by the Vermont Department of Health, and operates under the Healthy Communities division of the Bennington County Regional Commission. The nonprofit coordinates a Youth Ambassador Program and spearheaded efforts to establish Youth Appreciation Day. By starting with youth, ACT hopes to successfully take on the bottom-up approach to fighting alcohol and substance abuse.

"Supporting youth strengthens families and enriches our community. By bringing together other sectors to look at ways to prevent substance abuse, we can better develop a clear vision on how to support our youth and make that work sustainable into the future," stated Morris in a press release.

The state legislator said that ACT and HAYC3 are looking for as much collaboration as they can get. Any individual, business or organization looking to provide insight or work toward research and solutions throughout the grant's timeframe, should contact ACT at 802-442-0713, ext. 9. Learn more at <http://actbennington.org/>.