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Local resource center crew promotes tobacco prevention

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State health officials announced last week that the adult smoking rate in Oklahoma had dropped to a historic low of less than 25 percent. And because state officials are calling for reducing adult and youth tobacco use rates to below the national 20 percent rate by 2012, organizations such as the Carter County **Turning Point** Tobacco Coalition and the Ardmore Area Prevention Resource Center are expected to redouble their efforts to discourage young people from using tobacco products.

"We support other agencies who are focused on tobacco prevention through our reward/reminder visits," AAPRC Director Gwynn Busby said.

Reward/reminder visits are unofficial "sting" operations targeting tobacco retailers to see if they are willing to break the law by selling tobacco products to minors. Resource center staff recruit student volunteers to test whether store clerks are willing to sell to youngsters.

"We go in first to make sure it is safe, and then they get in line to buy cigarettes or another tobacco product," prevention specialist Sara Morgan said. "If the clerk rings up the sale and tells them the price without checking their ID, the kid gives them a card (explaining the consequences of underage tobacco sales). We explain to the clerk that we are reminding them to ID."

The Ardmore center completes 150 of these checks per year. Busby said the reward/reminder checks are a particularly effective prevention tool.

"Actually, Carter County did very well," she said. "Only two out of 32 stores offered to sell to minors. However, we would like to see zero sales."

The AAPRC is charged with reducing underage drinking, tobacco and other drug use. The center serves Bryan, Carter, Garvin, Johnston, Love, Marshall, Murray and Pontotoc counties. The AAPRC is one of 16 similar centers throughout the state that are funded by the State Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. The agency establishes relationships with other organizations that have similar goals, such as 2M2L, a statewide initiative focused on reducing and preventing underage drinking. And it supports the Crystal Darkness campaign, which targets methamphetamine use, and social host ordinances, which hold adults accountable for hosting teen social gatherings where alcohol is served.

"Teenage drinking is not cool. It's not a rite of passage," Busby said. "It's not OK."

AAPRC staff members use evidence-based prevention approaches that have been proven to work, she said. Reports, such as the 2008 Oklahoma Prevention Needs Assessment Survey - which is broken down by county, provide insight into the types of behaviors that put teens at high risk of substance abuse, delinquency and dropping out of school.

Prevention specialist Elmar Perry said he believes more and more young people are involved in risky behavior. "I don't know if it is because they have more freedom or whether they are trying to imitate what the older kids are doing," he said. "Parental child-rearing styles have changed a whole lot."

While the challenges may seem overwhelming, the AAPRC is committed to reducing unhealthy behavior.

"While it started with Smokey the Bear and then went to "Just Say No," prevention has now become a science," Busby said.

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