



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **MENTAL HEALTH SYMPOSIUM DRAWS CONCERNED PARENTS, EDUCATORS, COMMUNITY LEADERS**

**Uniontown, PA** – Mental health is a topic of great discussion in the U.S. today, particularly among children and teens. According to the World Health Organization, anxiety, depression and behavioral disorders are among the leading causes of disability and illness in teens.

So, how can their communities help?

That's the question Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission and Communities That Care of Fayette County sought to answer, holding a We Can Make the Difference symposium last week at Penn State Fayette, The Eberly Campus to interact with community and church leaders, educators, social service organizations, parents and others wishing to make an impact.

FCDAC Prevention Supervisors Lee Winterhalter and Erica Usher opened the event with a discussion of the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), which is conducted every two years by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. The survey is given to students in grades 6, 8 and 10 and strives to gauge the students' knowledge of tobacco, alcohol, drugs and violence, along with their behaviors and attitudes about those topics. It also provides insight into related risk factors as well as preventive measures that may be taken.

Winterhalter said PAYS for Fayette County revealed that depression among youth is a particular risk factor in the area. He noted that Fayette County students scored higher than the state average on every criteria used to measure depression.

"It's nice to have this conversation because people are talking about youth mental health, and people are referring to it as a crisis," Winterhalter said, noting that survey results have prompted Communities That Care to focus specifically on depression among the many mental health issues facing today's youth. "We wanted to ensure that people hear the facts, and the right facts, but also the resources."

Representatives from a number of those local resources were on hand, staffing informational tables and speaking with those in attendance.

Keynote speaker Dr. Aaron Weiner, an addiction psychologist, addressed the topic of Adverse Childhood Experiences. ACES refers to potentially traumatic experiences, such as neglect, abuse or violence, that a person experiences before the age of 17. These incidents can have a profound impact on the child's future.

Chestnut Ridge Director of Crisis Services and Corporate Development Bethany Conners spoke on suicide prevention, specifically the method of Question, Persuade, Refer. Training in QPR teaches how to recognize the warning signs of suicide, how to offer hope, and how to get help.

The seminar covered not only ways to recognize risk behaviors and potential crises, but also strategies that can help, including Positive Action, Social Development Strategy, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools and Youth Mental Health First Aid.

Communities That Care Board Co-Director Dr. Shawna Little concluded the event with a discussion on ways community members can make the difference.

“I would say the biggest takeaway for me, how we want them to make a difference, is first of all, they can join Communities That Care,” Little said.

Little explained that Communities That Care is a coalition that “utilizes preventive science to enact change in our communities for our youth.” She said the coalition is in need of new members. Meetings are held monthly and can be attended via Zoom, she said.

“We need people that are committed to prevention in Fayette County,” she said, adding that some had taken that first step simply by attending the seminar. “Another way people can make a difference is (to) talk to their local representatives, talk to their school board leaders because these are the people that can impact policies. And just keep staying involved; keep getting that message out to our youth.”

Little said in her job as workforce development coordinator at Connellsville Area Career and Technical Center, she sees the impact involved adults can make on youth.

“We need as many passionate adults as possible positively impacting our youth in today’s society,” she said.

For more information on Communities That Care of Fayette County, visit the website at [www.ctcfayette.org](http://www.ctcfayette.org) or the organization’s Facebook page.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.FayetteCountyPA.org](http://www.FayetteCountyPA.org).

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