

# THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

## Gratiot County Prevention Program Named 'Coalition of the Year'

By William Meiners  
Herald Staff Writer

It may take more than a village to tackle big challenges like underage drinking and suicide ideation. In this county, a robust collaboration has been addressing those problems head on for years. And their important work has not gone unrecognized. Earlier this month, the Gratiot County Substance and Suicide Prevention Program (GCSSPP) received the Coalition of the Year award from the Michigan Coalition to Reduce Underaged Drinking (MCRUD).

The award was given at MCRUD's annual conference in Lansing on October 6. Emily Rayburn, program director of the GCSSPP, who attended the conference with colleagues from Child Advocacy, told The Herald they did not know of the honor ahead of time. So it was somewhat of a pleasant surprise.

"It's really nice to see all the hard work and dedication get rewarded," Rayburn said.

That dedicated work extends to the very coalition partners — from high school students to health services, law enforcement agencies to other government entities — all of whom were effectively recognized with the award. A program within the Child Advocacy, one of the county's most successful nonprofits, GCSSPP was founded as the Gratiot County Substance Abuse Coalition in 2005.

### Youth-driven initiative

Part of the Prevention Network, MCRUD stresses the all-hands-on-deck philosophy in preventing underage drinking. Indeed the organization's website claims it's "everybody's business." Not solely the responsibility of parents, schools, law enforcement, or anyone else. It's a community-wide responsibility.

Mike Tobias has been the MCRUD coordinator for a decade, and he volunteered there for 10 years before that. He said there

are likely more than 100 similar coalitions around the state. Places like Gratiot County may have one, but Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne counties may have as many as 20 each.

A few things stand out about the Gratiot coalition, Tobias told The Herald. Among those are the use of surveys, direct work with youth, and the leverage of media — from a radio town hall to newspaper articles. On the youth front, he pointed out their "sticker shock" program.

Rayburn described the sticker shock program as a yearly occurrence during prom week. Student leaders from the Above the Influence program place bright yellow stickers around the county, trying to discourage everyone from buying alcohol for underage people.

"We have great relationships with all of the school administrators," Rayburn said. "Our Above the Influence program is basically our youth coalition. Each school has their own program, and they get to pick topics to highlight for the year."

Those topics can run the gamut from alcohol to prescription drugs, tobacco to vaping, and things in between. The student-run and focused programs can be particularly empowering. "It gives them the power to be proud of their community," Rayburn said. "It's telling them that as adults we really do listen, and we want to listen."

Some of that listening took place recently at a leadership summit held at the Youth For Christ facility in Alma. With large representation from Breckenridge and Fulton schools, in particular, some 40 to 45 students got together at the fifth such gathering.

Adults in the room, typically ranging from the Sheriff's Office, Gratiot Health Integrated Network, and Judge Stewart McDonald's frequent appearances help provide both cautionary tales and real advice on how to deal with



On October 6, the Gratiot County Substance and Suicide Prevention Program received the Coalition of the Year award from the Michigan Coalition to Reduce Underaged Drinking. Pictured from the left: Jennifer Stambaugh, Child Advocacy CEO, Shana Dancer, GCSSPP Vice Chair, Sara Krebs, GCSSPP Prevention Coordinator, and Emily Rayburn, GCSSPP Director.

stress. "We bring in these individuals to speak because they're experts in their field," Rayburn said. "We've all seen how alcohol can affect someone's life negatively. So we encourage everyone to wait until they're 21 and let them know you don't have to be intoxicated to have fun."

### New name, same passion

Just as new students take active roles in the Above the Influence program each year, the coalition has continuously tried to evolve to better meet the challenges that many people face in all communities. In September, they voted on the new name, officially becoming the Gratiot County Substance and Suicide Prevention Program.

The new name effectively changed the idea of "substance abuse" to prevention while bringing suicide to the forefront. "One

of my biggest goals has been stigma reduction," said Rayburn, who has been a coalition coordinator for five years and the program director for one year.

Many people dealing with stress or a mental health crisis may self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. The notion of abuse can be stigmatizing as they try to navigate those situations. The name change, Rayburn said, better reflects their current programming.

In a recent release announcing the new name, the GCSSPP documented more of its history. Under the leadership of Child Advocacy, the coalition has grown to a staff of four, and more than 47 members. The coalition is comprised of community members, law enforcement partners, education providers, healthcare team members, and many human services agencies.

Through all of these valuable community partnerships, the Gratiot County Substance and Suicide Prevention Program has been able to implement a vast array of valuable programming into the community over the last 18 years. A few include: Above the Influence programming in the schools, Suicide Prevention programming in the schools and throughout the community, Suicide Prevention Month, Responsible Prescribing Series at MyMichigan Medical Center-Alma, Medication drop boxes at all Gratiot County law enforcement offices, and the Narcan vending machine at Gratiot Integrated Health Network.

For more information on the GCSSPP, or to learn how you can become involved, please contact the director Emily Rayburn at 989-463-1422 or emily@childadvocacy.net.

## St. Louis Food Pantry and Thrift Store Looking to Help More in Need



Pictured is Lyle McCoon Jr., new director of the Office of Human Services (OHS), a food pantry and thrift store located in downtown St. Louis.

By William Meiners  
Herald Staff Writer

They've got food, clothing, and furniture for people in need, and they want to distribute it. That seems to be the general philosophy of the new director of the Office of Human Services (OHS), a food pantry and thrift store in downtown St. Louis.

Lyle McCoon Jr., also pastor of the Free

Methodist Church in Wheeler Township, took on the director role at OHS in mid-August. He told The Herald though the name of the place sounds more like a government office, the aim is to provide folks with some very basic needs.

Located across the street from City Hall on Mill Street, OHS is staffed with volunteers from 8:30 a.m. to noon, Monday through

Friday. Those volunteers, which they could use more of, generally sort through donated goods. On Tuesday through Thursday, the pantry is open for business during those same hours.

McCoon emphasized their "low-priced" goods. "We're very discounted," he said. "You might find a pair of good used pants for \$5 somewhere else. But you can get them here for \$1."

Last year they had enough "overflow clothing" to donate to an organization called World Missions. In turn, more than 500 large bags of clothes made their way overseas.

On the food bank front, they offer people "emergency food" — about a week's worth — to anyone who needs it. McCoon said there are no restrictions regarding residences or incomes. If you need food, come in and ask for it. Though that week's worth is limited to once per month.

"We get a lot of donations from local farms, as well as the garden from the nearby prison," McCoon said. "We've been giving out corn for two months now, and people can get fresh tomatoes, peppers, and more."

Hard times may come in waves for folks, especially during high-inflationary periods where everything costs more. McCoon said they also offer financial assistance, which could mean anything from helping someone who has received a "shut off" notice from a utility company, providing some money to help make rent, or giving out gas cards to

help people to doctor appointments and elsewhere.

McCoon said they have worked with other community agencies, including the Gratiot Integrated Health Network, the Commission on Aging, and Hope House to better coordinate their services. For example, if there's a family or individual just getting back onto their feet with temporary housing, OHS can provide them a coupon voucher to pick up some furniture for their new place.

"Last year we served 300 clients, and we would love to do more," McCoon said. "What's cool about our organization is that our thrift store brought in \$39,000 in sales last year and we gave out about \$42,000 worth of assistance. So it pretty much pays for the assistance."

As a nonprofit, OHS takes monetary donations, as well. McCoon said he plans to explore more grant opportunities, as well. The lone paid employee, he said the volunteers are critical to keeping the store up and running.

The pastor and his wife Dawn moved to Gratiot County earlier this year after spending 13 years at a Free Methodist church in Indianapolis. As his new church prepares to celebrate its 75th anniversary in Wheeler Township, McCoon said the thrift store fits in well with the ministry.

"Helping the poor and other community members aligns nicely with the mission of the church," McCoon said.