

United Way of the Laurel Highlands aims to raise \$1.5 million



1

United Way of the Laurel Highlands announced a \$1.5 million 2016 fundraising goal Wednesday – and pointed to one of its top programs as an example of how donations are helping the community.

During a campaign kickoff at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, United Way CEO Bill McKinney said money raised would be used to fund evidence-based programs in support of the charity's three main focuses: early childhood development, parental engagement and drug-and-alcohol abuse prevention.

In particular, United Way plans to continue expanding the impact of Botvin LifeSkills Training, a substance abuse prevention program, in schools across Cambria and Somerset counties.

Keynote speaker Craig Zettle, vice president of Botvin LifeSkills, said his company's program is a step ahead of anti-drug campaigns of yesteryear such as the famous 1980s spot that showed an egg cooking in a pan, accompanied by the slogan, "This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?"

Early campaigns were memorable and had some value in that they raised awareness, but ultimately did little to change behaviors. They were largely ineffective at reducing drug use, Zettle said.

In contrast, he said, Botvin LifeSkills Training is a broad-based curriculum – not an assembly or a series of lectures – designed to teach students personal self-management skills, general social skills and drug resistance skills. Data suggests that students with these skills are less likely to abuse drugs, drive recklessly, commit sexual assault and bully others, Zettle added.

"The United Way... is really leading the charge in terms of evidence-based prevention," Zettle said. "It's changing our communities for the better and making them places people want to live in, places people want to come back to, and places where people want to continue to raise their families."

McKinney said when his charity started looking for a substance abuse prevention program to implement in the Laurel Highlands, leaders learned that Botvin LifeSkills Training was the top-ranked evidence-based program in the United States.

Right now, McKinney said, Botvin LifeSkills Training is being taught to middle school students in all 24 school districts in Cambria and Somerset counties. In the future, funded in part by this year's fundraising campaign, the program will be expanded to elementary and high schools, he said.

McKinney said that it would cost about \$850,000 to institute the program in third through eighth grades throughout Cambria and Somerset counties.

Based on the "promising" data his charity has collected since 2011, when Botvin LifeSkills' program was first introduced, McKinney believes the program has been just as successful in the Laurel Highlands as Zettle said it has been throughout the country.

Ed Sheehan Jr., president and CEO of Concurrent Technologies Corp. and former chairman of the United Way of the Laurel Highlands board of directors, praised the program as a necessity for the Laurel Highlands region.

"In my opinion, we need to do everything possible to make our community safe, and starting to focus on young people, early in life, is a good thing," Sheehan said.

Also at Wednesday's breakfast, Greg Winger, a member of the United Way of the Laurel Highlands board of directors, announced that the 1889 Foundation, a Johnstown philanthropic organization, will again provide a grant matching donations to the United Way of the Laurel Highlands up to \$500,000. The foundation did so in 2015 as well.

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