

*Mobilizing Youth for Healthier Communities* began as a collaborative research project in 2014 inspired by Laleh Talebian, PhD and former Director of Community Health Education and Cancer Prevention at the Norris Cotton Cancer. The underlying theory motivating the project is grounded in the belief that historically, the most powerful social movements have been driven by young people, who can uproot social norms, influence elections, and drive policy changes.

The primary goal of the two year project is to create a replicable and sustainable model for educating, empowering and motivating teens to influence policies aimed at reducing tobacco use and obesity in their local communities.

*"I experienced this [aha] moment about the power of youth after working with a group of students at the Hartford Area Career and Technology Center (HACTC) in 2013. This interaction inspired me to leverage the energy and passion of teenagers to tackle two major public health challenges facing our region and the nation: obesity and tobacco,"* says Dr. Talebian.

During the first year of the project, 30 junior students from the Allied Health and the Human Services programs at the Hartford Area Career and Technology Center (HACTC) gained in-depth knowledge regarding tobacco use and cancer; nutrition and obesity; and obesity and physical activity. Students were instructed in basic research methods to observe and analyze their local communities' relationships to the three topic areas. Each program met at HACTC two hours twice a month with Dr. Talebian and co-presenter and consultant to the project, Dr. Jeffrey Spiegel.

In year one, students were instructed on how to identify their core values and relate them to one of the 3 topic areas. According to Dr. Spiegel, *"We wanted the students to personally invest in these important issues by having them reflect on what they believed were important goals in their lives and how they related to individual, group and community health."*

As action research, students reflected on research literature, personal experiences, family histories, local business practices and school policies to develop policy changes addressing the issues of tobacco use and obesity. Common Core competencies for each participating program at HACTC were integrated with critical thinking skills, analysis of data, public speaking, written communication, leadership development and community engagement. Students also attended a presentation at the Norris Cotton Cancer Research Center by Alan Blum, MD endowed Chair in Family Medicine at the University of Alabama, and a world leader in tobacco prevention education and research.

As the students engaged in on-going self-reflection, they worked collaboratively in six groups to develop and implement group action plans for policy change. Those plans eventually evolved into poster presentations to researchers at Norris

Cotton Cancer Research Center. This was a powerful learning experience for junior year students and each group demonstrated their knowledge of various aspects of tobacco and alcohol use, poor nutrition and obesity and insightful recommendations for policy change in their local communities and schools.

It is also important to note that the program teachers from the Allied Health and Human Services programs also acquired new information relevant to their curriculums. According to the Allied Health teacher, Ms. Louisa Vandenberg “*The program gave students the opportunity to think about what we learn in class and apply it to how they can impact our community for the better. I believe in the power of youth to impart social change, and this project helps students realize their own power.*”

In its second year, the *Mobilizing Youth for Healthier Communities* (MYFHC) project continued its work with a unique collaboration between *ReThink Health of the Upper Connecticut River Valley*. After a year of exploring a variety of poverty-related health issues here in the Upper Valley, the Allied Health class is now embarking on an action research effort to address two issues they consider significant in their home school communities: Healthy life skills for elementary-aged children, and; tobacco use amongst teens.

Currently, the two research teams are in the development stage of their planning. One of their primary goals is to partner with local and community activists to affect changes in early health education and tobacco cessation practices and policies that will have a meaningful impact on adolescents.

One provocative research tool the students explored was *photovoice*, an approach to inquiry about health and social issues effecting Upper Valley communities. Working in teams, the students reflected on photographs they took of their towns that represented challenges people face due to poverty and poor health practices.

The *photovoice* experiences have encouraged the class to identify realistic and imaginative short and long term goals and to develop strategies for implementing their research projects. They plan to meet with local school administrators, classroom teachers, and school nurses to gather information regarding health issues and to propose an education partnership for improving the lives of children and teens.

On Monday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, four students from the Allied Health program from HACTC, Cathy Hazlett, Executive Director for Health Connections of the Upper Valley and project consultant, Jeff Spiegel, visited 8 local stores that sell tobacco products. The senior year students Amber Wilson, Steven Washington, Morgan Tewksbury and Samantha Howe, spoke with store managers about their concerns regarding tobacco and its impact on youth. They presented a letter of invitation to a meeting on Tuesday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, at the Coolidge Hotel in White

River Junction from 3:30-5:30 PM for area storeowners. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss ways to limit the advertising displays and placement of tobacco products in local establishments.

At each store, the students took turns speaking to the managers and explained why they are concerned about the use of tobacco and related products and their effect on the health and safety of local residents. Given that the students were graduating from the Allied Health program at HACTC, they were knowledgeable about the harmful aspects of tobacco use as well as the impact of first, second and third hand smoke.

As action research, the students reflected on current studies and surveys, personal experiences, family histories, local business practices and school policies to develop proactive ways to address the issue of tobacco use. Cathy Hazlett has played a major role informing the students with latest research about tobacco in Vermont for all age levels. Through her efforts and the Vermont Department of Health, a meeting has been scheduled on March 29<sup>th</sup>, with local storeowners to hear a presentation by one of the students, Stephen Washington, about the dangers of tobacco use and ways to combat the issue.

*Mobilizing Youth for Healthier Communities* project Director, Laleh Talebian, who is the Research Project Manager associated with The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice has been instrumental in inspiring the high school students to educate their communities about best health practices.