Kansas 4-H plans ‘community conversations’ during Discovery Days

Officials to kick off $100K initiative aimed at improving wellbeing of youth

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – An official with Kansas 4-H Youth Development has announced that the program will launch a $100,000 initiative aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of youth during 4-H Discovery Days in early June.

Amy Sollock, a 4-H youth development specialist in southwest Kansas, said youth will be invited to participate in a series of ‘community conversations’ in which they’ll be encouraged to share their views on what it looks like to live a healthy lifestyle, issues they may struggle with, and more.

Kansas 4-H Discovery Days is set for June 7-9 on the Kansas State University campus in Manhattan.

“We want to come together and create a space for youth to have meaningful conversations,” Sollock said. “We want to put youth in a position to where they have the agency to tell us what they see as a priority for their mental and physical well-being. Then, based on what they tell us, we’ll be able to put a plan together on how we want to address those topics.”

In January, the Kansas 4-H Foundation announced it had received $100,000 to implement a program called Healthy Blue – which is a partnership with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City, and Anthem Partnership Holding Company.

As part of the program, Kansas 4-H agents may address such topics as healthy coping skills, interventions, fitness, nutrition, life skills, healthy peer-to-peer interactions and preventing substance abuse and addiction.

“I want youth to take the lead in what they feel like needs to be addressed,” Sollock said. “I want to know from young people where they see this going. We’ve been given a tremendous financial gift and I want to make sure that what we do with it makes an impact and will be beneficial for young people in our communities across Kansas.”
Elaine Johannes, the Kansas Health Foundation’s Distinguished Professor of Community Health at K-State, said open conversation with youth is especially important coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We’ve gone through the pandemic…but we’re now seeing the effects of that unintended isolation, (which included) not being able to have a routine, expecting to go to school every day with friendship groups, and more,” Johannes said.

In early May, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released a report confirming negative health effects on Americans due to isolation and loneliness. May is recognized in the United States as Mental Health Awareness month.

“Physically, we seem to have higher blood pressure and hypertension due to a lack of people being connected,” Johannes said. “And people are having issues related to cholesterol; some of the research that looks at how we have higher cholesterol in our bloodstream when we have fewer opportunities to be socially connected is amazing.”

“From a social-emotional standpoint, we are a species that thrives on knowing that we are part of a community,” she adds. “Younger people – even those under age 9 – are feeling alone, and maybe depressed.”

A recent questionnaire given to younger people – called Communities that Care – indicated that youth in high school were thinking about hurting themselves. “I do think that Kansas kids are feeling the brunt of not being connected,” Johannes said.

Sollock notes that 4-H’s community conversations series – which will be offered in the state even after Discovery Days – is part of the solution.

“We’re focusing on a holistic, healthy being – both body and mind,” she said. “We want kids to develop the skills to be resilient, to overcome the challenges that they face so that they can become responsible, thriving adults.”

More information on community conversations and other programs offered by the Kansas 4-H Youth Development program is available online or at local extension offices in Kansas.

-FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Kansas 4-H Discovery Days, https://www.kansas4-h.org/events-activities/conferences-events/discovery-days/index.html
Kansas 4-H teams with Healthy Blue to improve wellness of Kansas youth, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/news/stories/2023/01/4h-teams-with-healthy-blue-to-address-mental-health.html
Communities that Care survey (Kansas data), https://kctcdata.org
Kansas 4-H Youth Development, https://www.kansas4-h.org
K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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