

OUR TOWNS

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\$1 MILLION GRANT FROM DUNHAM FUND

Partnership to focus on teen drug prevention

By Marissa Amoni

SPECIAL TO THE BEACON NEWS

A partnership established in the name of the late Aurora businessman and philanthropist John C. Dunham will reach out to local youths with emerging drug or alcohol problems.

Students who previously might have slipped through the cracks will be the focus of a campaign that will involve prevention, early intervention, treatment and after-care.

More than \$1.1 million from the Dunham Fund grant will go to Breaking Free, an Aurora-based agency that deals with substance abuse prevention and treatment. The funding, spread out over three years, will be used to operate the newly developed Dunham Student Assistance Center.

As an extension of Breaking Free, the center will work with middle schools and high schools to provide resources and services deemed critical by the schools, said Breaking Free Executive Director Michael Moran.

"(The grant) gives us the opportunity to make services more accessible," he said.

Moran said Breaking Free counselors typically see students at their facility, at 120 Gale St., through a referral system. "This eliminates the barrier," he said.

Moran said the goal is to "help kids be drug and alcohol free."

The Dunham Student Assistance Center will use the existing working relationship that Breaking Free has with local schools to determine the level of support needed.

"We will work with districts and see what's already in place. We'll help provide support and education and we'll engage in a discussion," he said.

Moran hopes to have clinical services onsite at schools. Schools will also be equipped with resources to quell substance abuse, like educational materials,

speakers, and counseling support.

The timing could be critical, since both marijuana and alcohol use is on the rise among students, as shown in the latest Illinois Youth Survey. When eighth, 10th and 12th-grade students were asked whether they had used marijuana or alcohol in the past month, the number increased from 15.3 percent in 2004 to 16.6 percent in 2006 for marijuana, and from 36.3 percent in 2004 to 40.7 in 2006 for alcohol.

"We want to reach problems before they blow out of proportion," said Theresa Shoemaker, executive director of Communities in Schools of Aurora.

Shoemaker said many schools, like East Aurora High School, often have only a couple of social workers who do not have the time or resources to take care of problems before they become serious.

Many times, she said, substance abuse first becomes an issue once a student has been caught. Having counselors available for students, along with information and support groups, might help staff to spot warning signs of substance abuse and enable schools to get to students earlier.

The grant enables Breaking Free to retain staff whose positions would have been eliminated due to state budget cuts.

The team of two will spend the first year integrating the center into schools. The second and third year will hopefully bring more staff to allow for assessment, intervention and support services.

Alina Cyrus, a social worker at East High, said she is glad that students will have more accessibility to substance abuse prevention services. She said there are a lot of families who do not access services in the community.

"It is so much more convenient to get services while in school," Cyrus said.

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