

Youth in Transition conference comes to St. Albans again

Activities, discussion planned in second year of local event

By **JESSIE FORAND**
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ST ALBANS – Youths in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties will have their voices heard next week, when the second annual Youth In Transition Conference takes over the Knights of Columbus building in St. Albans from 8:30 a.m. until 2:30 p.m.

The day – filled with fun things to do and informative discussions – will focus on young people as they travel through what is typically the most complex time in one's life.

Vermont counties were awarded the multi-year, federally funded grant and are choosing to do different things with it, according to Kayla Tatro, the team leader of adolescence services at NCSS.

Ebony Nyoni began working in April 2010 as the Youth In Transition Grant Coordinator

for Franklin and Grand Isle Counties, and is the primary organizer of the second-annual Youth in Transition Conference, on Nov. 11 – or 11.11.11, as the event poster points out.



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Kayla Tatro (left) and Ebony Nyoni discuss the Youth in Transition grant and prepare for the Youth In Transition Conference, to be held Nov. 11.

The conference is intended to be for youth, by youth, Nyoni said; tailored toward youth in the Franklin and Grand Isle regions and providing information youth are interested in.

For example, round-table discussions will be co-facilitated by young people to present information and develop solutions, a think tank of sorts.

Exhibitors from throughout the region will be on hand to show what they have to offer. Some of these include JOBS (Jump Or Board for Success), the Community College of Vermont (CCV), Vermont Department of Health, TD Bank, Vermont Adult Learning, Outright Vermont, Voices Against Violence, Vermont Works for Women, Planned Parenthood, as well as a display from Youth In Transition and Adolescent Services.

Sponsors include Mousetrap Pediatrics, TD Bank, and CCV.

Tatro said this event will serve as a networking opportunity for youth to talk with different organizations.

There will also be a youth panel discussing experiences of those who may be in foster care, receiving substance abuse treatment, taking part in drug court programming; and what it's like to be a youth.

Nyoni said this will allow insight as to what youth needs are based on items they bring up during these discussions.

The conference is completely free, it will feature giveaways, and entertainment will be provided, including a youth group from Burlington who will perform rap music.

The event does take place during school hours, but Nyoni felt that might make it easier for kids to attend, perhaps receiving a

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Ebony Nyoni

ride from a contact person at school to the conference. The hope is to eventually have local students attend by the busload to check things out, but it is still a fairly new event, so students may have to bring in a permission slip so they can participate.

Aside from an annual statewide conference, this is the only one of its kind. In fact, Nyoni often receives calls from other communities seeking advice on their programs.

This is because the conference is just a small piece of how the grant is implemented in the Franklin/Grand Isle area.

Nyoni explained there are a few major components to the grant. The first is youth leadership, in which a team of youth between 16 and 22 meets for a youth summit, even traveling to other regions so the young adults can speak about their lives. The group meets every Thursday, but alternates between girls and boys.

The weekly meetings allow for youths to develop leadership skills while tapping into their personal strengths and goals, she said.

Another component is community - building bridges between the community and youths; strengthening the system of care related to youths, Nyoni explained, as well as providing a platform for youth to speak.

Nyoni said she does a lot of connecting - allowing youths to bond with area

resources.

"It's definitely themed in Vermont: youth voice movement, so that's a big part of why we exist, to give youth a voice," she said.

The criteria for which youths could participate was originally quite specific, Nyoni explained, but has now has broadened thanks to the statewide nature of the grant. Youth In Transition literature explains participants ages 16 to 22 must fit into one or more of the following categories: be a part of a youth subculture (GLBTQ, Island residents, youth of color, youth moms, or at-risk youth), be in need of housing, be in recovery or in need of immediate or long-term assistance, be eligible for or receiving cross-agency case management and individualized services planning, or have impaired functioning in school, family or community.

"Because youth in transition includes all youth, they all need supports and resources at different points in their lives," said Nyoni.

This program allows many different avenues of support - mental health, finding jobs or housing, helping with transportation for the more rural youths who may need help in order to get to NCSS appointments.

Tatro added that Youth In Transition has been a nice complement to other NCSS services; established programs like JOBS, a housing program, and substance abuse services.

"It was nice have this new model come in and kind of provide a bigger way for youth - who are already involved in these services and not - to have a voice and to kind of give feedback on how these services are going, what's working, what's not, all those different things," Tatro explained.

Additionally Nyoni said Youth In Transition is open to all. She wants to dispel myths surrounding mental health, people thinking they can't participate because being seen would lump them in with "those kids."

"What we want to establish is that everyone - just like people have dental health or eye care - everyone has mental health and everyone at different points in time need support," she said.

Nyoni and Tatro explained the program has done a number of events in the community, dances for example, which are sponsored by NCSS, attractive to youth and may break down stigmas.

A fun way to raise money for Youth In Transition is called Care Cards; thirteen categories of greeting cards designed by the youth involved in the program and with peers in mind. There is a card that reads "life is like a rollercoaster; keep on riding," geared toward suicide prevention. The "welcome back" card has youth returning from recovery in mind. And the traditional birthday card gets a mindful spin with "hope it's better next year."

Crisis numbers are listed on the cards' backs, for those who need encouragement and resources.

A host site for the cards is currently being sought. They will be sold for fifty cents each.

"That's the biggest part - helping to improve the system of care, making more resources available," Nyoni said.