



*Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service*

# Partners in learning for life

## **KEYS Mentor program helps, youth, teens, and adults in Campbell County**

### **Situation**

Mentoring is a proven way to help prevent substance abuse, school truancy, and violent behaviors in at-risk youth. Recognizing the need for a mentor program in Gillette, the UW Campbell County CES and the Gillette Abuse Refuge Foundation began work in November 1999 to develop a social mentoring program for youth ages 8 to 12 years. The two organizations, assisted by the Employment Resource Center, Campbell County School District, and several other local agencies, founded the Keeping Every Youth Successful, or KEYS, Mentor Program in July 2000.

The KEYS Program's unique approach is a good fit for Campbell County in a number of different ways:

- Both teenagers (15 years and older) and adults are recruited as mentors. Adults are asked to formally mentor the younger children in the program and also to act as informal mentors for the teens involved. Mentors make a one-year commitment to the KEYS program.
- Because Gillette is a very transient community, each youth is matched with two or three mentors. This strategy decreases the possibility of the youth feeling rejected or left out if one of the mentors moves away from the area.
- Mentors commit to bimonthly mentor meetings and trainings, as well as monthly get-togethers with youth. The program has offered a summer overnight camp, game nights, and the fall barn bash. Upcoming events include a penny carnival, a "gift of giving" party, and the winter overnight retreat.
- Mentors are asked to maintain contact with the youth via e-mail, phone, or standard mail; they are not asked to spend independent time alone with youth. This policy reduces the need for extensive background checks and cuts down on the number of volunteer hours required of mentors.

- The KEYS mentor program closely follows the Healthy Communities Healthy Youth philosophy, which emphasizes a set of developmental assets that are essential to youth success. The program will focus on two of these assets (teamwork and positive identity) for the first year.

The KEYS Program is funded by Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR), Planned Approach to Community Health (PATCH), and K-N Energy grants, and through local donations. Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA) funds the program coordinator's salary.

### **Impacts Achieved**

Currently, the KEYS mentor program has 9 active mentors and 16 youth participants. Program leaders hope to have 20 mentors and 30 youth participants by September 2001.

KEYS youth receive back-to-school care packages in the fall. Both youth and teens attend an ice cream social with the program coordinator; this provides a relaxed atmosphere in which to discuss school progress or to request tutoring from a mentor. Both youth participants and mentors receive a monthly newsletter throughout the year that highlights upcoming events, encourages family participation, and discusses the developmental assets.

Youth participants and their parents have given positive feedback about the program. One parent mentioned how her son always feels valued and cared about when he comes home from KEYS events. She said, "He is so proud to be a part of the mentor program."

Teen mentors report feeling "important and needed." One mentor said, "I can't believe these little kids think I'm so cool. I never thought of myself as a role model before I started in the program. Now I feel like I'm somebody."

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