

Local News

Group recognized for drug prevention efforts with youths

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Old enough to have learned to speak her family's Sudanese dialect and appreciate the customs, yet young enough to be fully immersed in American culture, Athou Lam of Rochester has become a bridge of sorts.

As the program director for New Sudan American Hope, Lam volunteers to educate both Sudanese-American teens and their immigrant parents about the cultural differences they face.

"The main problem is we're coming from a different culture. Parents are not aware of drugs or the issues their children face in schools. They haven't experienced that," Lam said.

That's where the New Sudan American Hope, a Rochester-based nonprofit organization, comes in.

"We're the middle," she said. "We help bridge that gap."

In September, the organization was awarded the Minnesota Department of Human Services Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division's Achievement Award for Outstanding Service in the Prevention of Drug and Alcohol Problems.

This is the first year of what's expected to be an annual statewide award to recognize programs or individuals that exemplify successful prevention efforts, said Cindy Tri, regional prevention coordinator for Southeastern Minnesota, who nominated the group for the award.

"Their heart is really in it for prevention," Tri said. The nonprofit organization has been running for 10 years with no paid staff and very little resources, she said.

The group also faces cultural challenges, Tri said. For instance, because Islam bans alcohol, it can be difficult to approach someone who's using, she said.

Fighting substance abuse

New Sudan American Hope's mission is to overcome those barriers, as well as barriers between other cultures. Earlier this year, the group received a grant from the Rochester Area Foundation to extend its mission to other groups by creating a Diversity Coalition.

The goal of the coalition is to reduce substance abuse and related problems within diverse populations by building partnerships with schools, businesses, law enforcement, religious communities and other key leaders.

About 20 groups are already involved in the Diversity Coalition, said Benson Giwa, executive director of New Sudan American Hope. Together they share resources and create connections, he said.

The group also has monthly youth meetings that draw between 10 and 50 teens depending on the topic, Lam said. The meetings are open to all minorities and immigrants, and the topics cover issues young people face, she said.

That broad approach has helped with the group's substance abuse prevention efforts.

What happened: New Sudan American Hope won a statewide award for its work with Sudanese young people to prevent drug abuse.

What it means: Many Sudanese families face a generation gap; parents come from a different culture and don't understand the problems their children face in American schools. The group aims to bridge that gap.

What's next: New Sudan American Hope formed a Diversity Coalition to help other minority youths. To join the Diversity Coalition, e-mail [New Sudan American Hope](mailto:NewSudanAmericanHope@gmail.com)

If teens are struggling in school or don't have a plan for the future, they are more likely to drop out of school and turn to drugs or alcohol, Giwa said.

At New Sudan American Hope, "Teens know they have a place to come if they need help," Lam said.

"We initiated New Sudan American Hope with Benson and other elders by thinking, 'What legacy are we going to leave for our children?'" said Archangelo Bambo Nela, board member and founder.

As immigrants, they want to hold on to their culture while also respecting the law and being good citizens, he said. Already, a number of Sudanese families own houses, their children are graduating from high school and want to pursue more.