

Latvian Teens Steer Community to Healthier Living

In the coastal town of Tukums, Latvia, a group of high school students is envisioning a healthier community--one with fewer teen pregnancies and drunk-driving fatalities. Under the auspices of a new community health initiative by the Riga-St. Louis, Missouri hospital partnership, the students are getting a chance to act on this vision, and will introduce a series of six health modules in their schools this fall.

The modules, one of which will be introduced each month from October through April, will address mental health, sexuality, school-age children's health, first aid/accident prevention, maternal and child health, and nutrition. Students will provide instruction and generate discussion on each of these topics by performing skits about peer pressure and self-esteem and how they relate to drug use; inviting their grandmothers to come into the schools to cook favorite recipes under the guidance of nutritionists; and publishing a coloring book to teach young children about the importance of hand-washing. High school students in St. Louis will share advice and learning materials with the Latvian teens throughout the year.

"The students will use whatever methods they can in order to bring topics into the forefront of community thinking," said Barbara Bogomolov, RN, MS, manager for Community Health and International Services at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, who described the initiative at several conference sessions on promoting health beyond the hospital setting.

Reducing infant mortality, fetal and maternal complications, incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, the abortion rate, and alcohol use among young people are all goals of the project, as is replication in other rural Latvian towns. The project will be carried out at no cost to the community, Bogomolov said, and will target isolated groups, such as the elderly and orphans, in addition to the broader population. Hence, students are designing the health modules to reach out to family members and friends outside the school setting.

Many community members--from the mayor to religious leaders to local pediatricians--have given their full support to the initiative. "We chose Tukums because individuals from the community said, 'Please, consider us,'" said Bogomolov. "This is an important point because our partnership will be graduating, and it is crucial that the people in Tukums be able to teach the next community."

"Our vision is that, within one year, there will not be one person in the Tukums region not affected by this project in some way," she said.