

NCHN Member Highlight

Santa Cruz County Adolescent Wellness Network - Nogales, Arizona

The Santa Cruz County Adolescent Wellness Network (AWN) is a group of local agencies that has been working to promote and improve adolescent wellness services through collaboration, education, and advocacy since 2007. The current partner organizations are Mariposa Community Health Center, the lead and fiscal agent, along with Southeast Arizona Area Health Education Center (SEAHEC), Santa Cruz County School Superintendent, Community Health Associates, Pinal Hispanic Council, Circles of Peace, and the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Santa Cruz County. The AWN is a place for partners to collaborate and share resources to identify and respond to adolescent wellness needs. The network's mission is to promote adolescent wellness through advocacy, education, and collaboration with youth, schools and community organizations serving youth, ages 12-25.

When asked to sum up the network in a nutshell, AWN's Network Director Ms. Cassalyn David stated; "It's a collaborative, dynamic group of really key organizations in our county that serve adolescents. It creates a space that wouldn't otherwise exist to address health issues that reach across silos." Ms. David expanded on this by explaining the benefits network members have experienced by being a part of this collaboration. They include: 1. Partners are able to provide services and make connections they would not otherwise be able to make. 2. Partners are able to provide services through this joint venture that they could not provide alone due to various funding source restrictions. 3. Social determinates of health can be addressed despite usual funding restrictions and silos.

From the start, network members had more ideas and larger ambitions than simply creating a typical fitness, after school or health literacy program. They did not want to start something that would be here and gone in a few short years. They saw the need for and chose a long-term design. Their vision was a holistic adolescent wellness infrastructure and wanting simultaneously to be part of the budding nationwide movement for youth empowerment. Grant funding for school health initiatives is often narrowly focused and short-term. The network's ability to obtain federal funding through the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Rural Health Network Development Grant Program has been key to AWN's sustainability. With Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP) support and connections to other rural health networks and national resources, AWN has been able to set and achieve ambitious goals for its infrastructure and services. They recognize they could not have accomplished this vision by continuing to work in silos. Their broad and well-connected coalition has been a critical factor to their success. Ms. David also cites the invaluable support of the National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN) and the technical assistance services provided by the National Rural Health Resource Center's Rural Health Innovations (RHI). She states working with these groups is easy and highly valuable. She feels her network and she, as a network leader, are understood by both organizations. These factors, along with the vast amount of resources available from these organizations, including the opportunity and ability to access peer support are incredibly valuable.

To help lead her network, Ms. David puts into practice actively using the resources available through NCHN and RHI, including seeking guidance from more experienced network leaders, attending NCHN educational conferences and consulting with her assigned technical assistance provider.

The border location of Santa Cruz County creates unique challenges which with the network must contend. One of these is immigration concerns. The local community lives its life on both sides of the border, crossing back and forth for work, education, family, and health care. This adds multiple layers of complexity to eligibility for services, continuity of care, and care coordination. Organizationally, it is very important for the network to know what is taking place in Mexico and AWN continues to develop relationships with key organizations across the border

Based on her experience as a rural health network leader, Ms. David was asked to provide advice to new or network leaders. Her responses were quick, concise and clear. 1. Become a member of NCHN. 2. Utilize the technical assistance afforded you. 3. Don't be discouraged when people have trouble understanding what a rural health network is.

Santa Cruz County Adolescent Wellness Network has been a member of the National Cooperative of Health Networks since 2010.

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