

The Cranberry Eagle

Wednesday, February 18, 2015

School Nurses Gather at SV for Symposium

By Jared Stonesifer

JACKSON TWP — Children with intellectual or developmental disabilities are far more likely to experience emotional, physical or sexual abuse in their lives, and it's up to school professionals to notice the signs and to intervene before it's too late.

Nearly 100 school nurses from around Western Pennsylvania heard that message after coming to the Seneca Valley Senior High School Monday to talk shop and to listen to seminars about student safety in schools.

Carly Frisk, a specialist with the Milestone HCQU West agency in Butler, spoke at the seminar and said she covers nine counties in Western Pennsylvania, working with children who have behavioral and developmental disabilities.

Each child **Frisk** comes across has a different story and different set of circumstances. However, she said almost every one of them has something in common.

"There's been some form of trauma in their lives," **Frisk** said.

Frisk added an unfortunate truth when she provided statistics that show cases of emotional, physical and sexual abuse skyrocket when a child has a learning or development disability. To make matters worse, **Frisk** said, those children often don't report the abuse for myriad reasons. That means it's up to professionals to step in and notice the warning signs when a child becomes withdrawn.

But whatever happens, it's up to school counselors and nurses to listen and nurture.

"Never judge people," **Frisk** said. "You need to be there for them in a supportive and safe environment."

That message resonated with Aaron Pellicano, who works as a school counselor in the Avonworth School District in Allegheny County.

Pellicano was one of the few professionals in attendance who isn't a nurse. But that doesn't mean he didn't take away important lessons and tips from the seminar.

"We're all an important part of the team," Pellicano said. "This is a wonderful approach to get all the support staff together and to formulate a plan."

Linda Starosta, a nurse at the Evans City Elementary and Middle schools, said the nursing symposium was designed just for that reason, to bring together professionals from around the region to brainstorm and talk about the best nursing practices around.

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“We have almost 100 people here today,” she said, adding that it’s important for those people to bounce ideas and practices off each other.

Nurses Anita Miklos and Lauren Rusinko came all the way from the Norwin School District in Westmoreland County for the seminar.

According to Rusinko, the drive was well worth her time. She gleaned all sorts of new information from experts.

“Something like this helps us to better identify problematic behaviors,” she said. “And that is something we can take back to our home districts.”

Seneca Valley Superintendent Tracy Vitale said the nursing symposium is a crucial tool to help professionals in school settings to better help the students they come in contact with every day. “Students coming to school prepared to learn starts with their mental and physical well-being,” she said.

Vitale also thanked Seneca Valley’s nursing professionals for organizing and hosting the annual event.

“I am most proud that they go the extra mile in planning, hosting and bringing together other school nurses to our campus for a day of learning and engagement,” she said.