

The Gadsden Times

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Communication still key for local youth groups

By [Andy Powell](#)

Times Staff Writer

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One good thing came out of the closing of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Alabama last May, according to Sheila Hurley, chair of the Youth Advisory Council. It's that local agencies and youth organizations have begun talking and planning together and finding out what programs different groups are offering.

Hurley, who is executive director of CED Mental Health, said the council includes representatives of city and county government, youth organizations, nonprofits, churches and other local agencies. It began meeting on a regular basis this summer after the Boys & Girls Club closed. It will continue to meet to plan and coordinate activities for children and youth even with the opening of the new Boys & Girls Club of Gadsden/Etowah County.

"The council's been instrumental in getting everybody to talk again and focus on the needs of children and the community," Hurley said.

What's come from that conversation, she said, is support for the revival of the Boys & Girls Club, support for programs involving the schools and support for getting the churches involved so that, as she put it, "they go beyond their own doors into the communities."

Hurley added, "It's expanded awareness and it's expanded the interest. It's got people talking that usually just stay to themselves and their own agency. It's amazing how much nobody talked to each other. This bad event with the closure of the club sparked the opening (of) doors for all sorts of programs in our community, and got government officials and school officials and the committee talking."

She said restaurants and businesses also have donated money and food to help sponsor youth programs.

"I think we've accomplished a lot (with) having a lot more partners coming in to help with our children," said Ava Gregory of CED Mental Health, who is the council's vice chair.

Churches have offered to host meetings such as free community movie nights, she said. Community centers also have offered space for programs and businesses have offered discounts on food.

"We've had a lot of buy-in from our community to help our young people," she said, "and even though the Boys & Girls (Club) has opened back up, we'll still got requests to keep the Community Nights going."

CED and local churches offer free movies and refreshments at the events.

Hurley said the council is adding events to a calendar and promoting them through a Facebook page, "Etowah Youth" and a Twitter account, @EtowahYouth.

"... One of the big things is just making sure information is out there," she said.

“That’s a major focus of this council.”

Hurley called it “a positive improvement” that more information is being shared with other groups and with the public, but said there’s still room for improvement.

“It got everybody thinking, and that promoted these events and promoted interest in doing more programs,” Hurley said. It also stimulated the Gadsden City Council and the Etowah County Commission to provide funding for programs, including an anti-bullying program, and other needs.

She not only would like to see more church involvement in youth activities, but hopes churches can provide volunteers. “That would have such an impact in each of the communities,” she said, “because if ... we combine the efforts between (those) pools of volunteers, imagine how many kids you can reach or how many families.” She said those volunteers would then impact others.

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