

Friday Night Connect
INSPPRA Distinguished Service Awards
Team category – Award of Excellence

In DuPage County, heroin-related deaths increased by 53 percent in 2016, with 78 people overdosing (compared to 51 in 2015).

And that increase has been a trend for several years. Alarmed by the epidemic of opioid use by preteens and teens, Willowbrook High School, the Villa Park Police Department, DuPage County and the DuPage Regional Office of Education hosted a heroin awareness presentation in March 2014 to educate students and parents/guardians about the heroin issue in DuPage County and throughout Illinois. They then joined with St. Paul Lutheran Church in Villa Park and State Rep. Deb Conroy to host a community forum in May 2014. After the success of those two events, the group members wanted to do more. They realized their work in helping youth follow a healthy, positive path was far from over – and it needed to expand.

The group quickly grew to include other community organizations, including the Villa Park/Lombard Clergy Association. After many meetings filled with conversations about what to do next, the concept came about to provide an ongoing program where students could come together and help one another grow and develop, while enjoying a fun environment filled with friends, food and games. The initiative became known as Friday Night Connect, with the focus of providing students in sixth through eighth grades with a safe place where they could relax with their peers and take part in exciting activities to help them make positive decisions. Along with games and food, each session also consists of a seasonal “secret topic,” where the students come together and complete an activity based on a given theme. Topics have included appreciation, gratitude and setting goals.

Friday Night Connect launched in October 2016 and takes place one Friday a month during the school year at Calvary United Methodist Church in Villa Park, Harvard Avenue Evangelical Free Church in Villa Park and York Center Church of the Brethren in Lombard. The Kiwanis Club of Villa Park and community members continue to provide financial support, and various local groups have donated games and equipment.

When you walk into a Friday Night Connect session, the first thing you notice is an atmosphere of inclusion – high-schoolers sharing a pizza with middle-schoolers, clergy leaders chatting with students and police officers playing games with participants. The impact of Friday Night Connect is immediately clear – participants truly connect and build a support system to guide them toward a successful future.

“The outcomes and benefits of the program are fluid and are still being determined, but our long-term goals include instilling a sense of community leadership within students and helping them develop healthy habits at an early age,” said John Huizinga, Pastor with Lombard Christian Reformed Church.

Willowbrook Social Worker Erik Engel agreed.

“We want to provide a safe, positive outlet for students who might be struggling in school or in their personal life and who might feel they don’t have a group where they ‘fit in’ and belong,” Engel said. “The hope is to establish a level of comfort between the participants and the organizations involved, so students feel welcome and part of those groups.”

Participation in the program continues to increase, and about 50 students have joined so far. Those students are mentored by a group of about 15 Willowbrook students, who help guide each meeting (along with adult supervision).

“Offering the opportunity for younger students to connect with high school students and have them as role models is a crucial aspect of this program,” said Kristen Rosenwinkel, Parish Administrator with St. Paul Lutheran Church.

One of those mentors is Willowbrook junior Tylor Settles.

“It’s a lot of responsibility,” Settles said. “The younger kids look up to you, and you need to show them the right way to act. It’s a very productive program for the participants and the mentors.”

Settles also is a Villa Park Police Explorer with the Villa Park Police Department and is a member of Willowbrook’s MENTORS group, a program designed to train upperclassmen to mentor underclassmen through being mentored by adult men.

“We communicate electronically so much these days, and Friday Night Connect helps students learn the importance and value of human interaction,” Settles said. “It’s very humbling to live in a village where I know my community really cares about me by implementing programs like this.”