



Commonwealth of Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services

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Film Project to Help Raise Awareness, Help Teens Cope with Emotional Distress

FRANKFORT, KY (Aug. 7, 2019) - A new project is under way to help Kentucky high school students learn more about prevention and healthy coping strategies to deal with bullying, substance use, and teen suicide through a creative partnership with the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental, and Intellectual Disabilities (BHDID), the state's Regional Prevention Centers, HoriZen Media, and The Rising Center.

Filming for an original 12-episode video series known as *The Pact*, envisioned as an educational resource for high school students, began in late May at various locations around Breathitt County. The videos, which follow a story arc examining the complex friendships between the series' main characters, use storytelling to facilitate learning and building coping mechanisms for young people dealing with the realities and stresses of the teenage years.

"The Pact covers relevant topics such as suicide, substance use, sexual violence, trauma, bullying, the discrimination experienced by marginalized populations, and more – but models positive behaviors, coping mechanisms, and strategies to overcome these issues," said Koleen Slusher, director of the Division of Behavioral Health in

BHDID. “The project gives us a chance to reach young people and engage them by employing creative storytelling techniques – but also comes with educational tools and resources for school personnel and parents to build upon the topics addressed in the series. We are extremely excited and hopeful about the potential of this project in terms of increasing our ability to reach young people in a more impactful way and begin to counter some of the negative images and themes they are exposed to in television, videos, and social media platforms.”

Filmed on location at Breathitt County High School and various sites around Jackson, Kentucky, *The Pact* was written by Charles Shouse and features a cast of actors from Kentucky and nearby states. Filming began in May and continued throughout the summer. The final project with curriculums is projected to be released next spring.

Behavioral health experts say evidence indicates a strong need for social and emotional interventions for young people. The Kentucky Incentives for Prevention (KIP) study, conducted in 2018, provides alarming data regarding issues facing Kentucky youths, particularly the prevalence of substance use. According to the survey, as many as 24% of high school seniors had drunk alcohol in the past 30 days, while an additional 13% reported binge drinking. The survey also revealed 26 percent of high school seniors had used e-cigarettes.

“Substance use has far reaching consequences and is a contributing factor in many other issues, including mental health status, suicidal ideation and attempts, and overall well-being,” said Steve Cambron, BHDID project coordinator for the Partnership for Success grant, which is the largest funding source for the project. “Our young people need healthy coping mechanisms and guidance about the risks of substance use and the impact on their health. Effective prevention means that in addition to decreasing the risk factors we must also create a culture of resilience by cultivating the protective factors. “

The survey also revealed 9.5% of 10th grade students have experienced unwanted sexual advances or attempted sexual assault while at school and 18.6% of Kentucky 10th graders reported feeling unsafe at school. Although rates of bullying declined

across multiple grade levels, rates are still high, with between 15.7% and 29% of Kentucky youth reporting that they experienced bullying within the previous year. Rates of clinically significant psychological distress rose, with 22% of 10th and 12th graders reporting psychological distress.

“Many of our youth are in crisis and/or experiencing emotional distress,” said Patti Clark, manager for the Prevention Branch with BHDID. “National rates of youth suicide continue to rise across demographics. The utilization of lethal means has risen among teen girls as the suicide rate gap between males and females narrows. The Pact, as well as other curriculum focused on substance use and suicide prevention, gives us avenues to reach young people so we can address these issues and concerns directly.”

The Pact project is the outcome of collaboration between DBHDID, the Kentucky Regional Prevention Centers, HoriZen Media, and The Rising Center and is funded mainly through Kentucky’s Partnership for Success Grant through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The PACT high school curriculum will target high school students in the 10th thru 12th grade. Additional curriculums are also in development that would make PACT content available to high school aged youth and their parents in the community.

The PACT will be introduced in schools across the state of Kentucky. Plans are being developed to make content available outside the state as requested as well.

The Pact

Cast

- **Phoenix:** Aleia Lindberg, Crestwood, KY; Ella Frazee, Louisville, KY.
- **Blaze:** Layne Stacey, Hazard, KY.

- **Micah:** Xavier Harris, Baltimore, MD
- **Seth:** Logan Kidd, Somerset, KY
- **Hayden:** Calloway Denton, Louisville
- **Jacob Wilder:** Jacob Johns, Lancaster, KY
- **Cole:** Deaton Gabbard, Jackson, KY

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The Cabinet for Health and Family Services is home to most of the state's human services and healthcare programs, including the Department for Medicaid Services, the Department for Community Based Services the Department for Public Health, the Department for Aging and Independent Living and the Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities. CHFS is one of the largest agencies in state government, with nearly 8,000 full- and part-time employees located across the Commonwealth focused on improving the lives and health of Kentuckians.