



# Prevention Collaboration in Action

Grantee  
Success Stories

## Making Prevention a Community Effort in Rural Arkansas

In 2019, Alex Smith was working for Harbor House, an Arkansas substance use prevention provider and SAMHSA Partnerships For Success (PFS) grantee. He was in charge of fostering local partnerships to implement youth substance misuse programs in Magnolia and surrounding towns in Columbia County.

Smith was from Little Rock, a city of 200,00 people. Magnolia, by contrast, was a small rural community. And while he had the prevention skills needed to implement effective prevention programs, he felt he lacked the knowledge of, and connections in, the rural context that would be necessary for success in Magnolia.

He approached the local Boys and Girls Club with an idea for preventing substance misuse among local youth. As a SAMHSA-funded prevention specialist, Smith knew the field of prevention. And as a trusted youth serving organization, the Boys and Girls Club could reach a wide community of youth, families, and potential partners.

***“I said, ‘I have grant funds. You have the youth in place. Let’s tackle this issue together and create a blueprint for how we want to solve this,’” recalls Smith.***

That conversation sparked a three-year collaboration between Harbor House and the Boys and Girls Club of Magnolia, resulting in multiple initiatives and activities to address youth substance misuse.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS

### **Become an Insider**

Well before any formal collaboration happened, Smith had already logged a lot of hours at the Club as a youth mentor and baseball coach. Working with local children and adolescents helped him see the scope of underage substance use within the community. His position as a volunteer also allowed him to build relationships with then-executive director Deneisa Jamerson and director of athletics and facilities Chris Ludwig.

When Smith decided to pursue a formal partnership with the Club, it was Jamerson and Ludwig he turned to. But his work to meet young people in an honest, authentic way also paid dividends. “Having Alex come in and become a mentor and a role model was big,” says Ludwig. “That got him in the door. Once kids accept you as a coach they respect you more.”

### **Start with Easy Wins**

For his first program, Smith worked with leadership to launch a campaign that they called Sports Save Lives, dedicated to building community through athletics. The mission was fully aligned with the Club’s programming and prevention priorities, and consistent with an identified need for more structured after school activities for young teens. Smith brought the content knowledge, and the Club provided an audience that could benefit from the campaign. It was a win-win arrangement.

The program also sought to break the cycle of addiction. “Many of our afterschool kids had parents or family members dealing with substance abuse,” says Ludwig. To help prevent youth from following that same path, “we provided the facilities and athletic programs for Harbor House to run the campaign.”

### **Engage New Partners to Expand Reach**

Smith also participated in a number of local adult coalitions dedicated to preventing substance misuse. One of these, HEALTH in Columbia County, included members with connections to important local industries. Smith used his participation in this coalition to boost support for a prevention-themed block party at the Boys and Girls Club in summer 2021.

“I presented the idea five months before the block party,” he says. “The coalition members thought it would be great. They brought in the corporations.”

Among the sponsors were Walmart, Cricket Wireless, Southern Aluminum, and the chemical manufacturing company Albemarle. Coalition members also reached out to their personal and professional networks to garner more support for the event. Eventually, 65 sponsors came on board to donate money, supplies, and services. They also helped broadcast information about the block party to the whole community.

***“In a small community like Magnolia, Facebook is your number one ally,” says Smith. “Everybody is on Facebook to see what’s happening. So, when you have the Boys and Girls Club and local businesses support a post about a prevention-led block party, it gets people talking.”***

Open to everyone in Magnolia, the block party featured back-to-school donations, a free COVID-19 vaccine clinic, and information about local mental health and substance misuse resources. The Club ended up distributing more than 500 backpacks filled with school supplies and prevention materials to children entering grades kindergarten through twelve.

### **Find Trusted Messengers**

One persistent challenge to prevention in Magnolia and surrounding towns was low participation in the Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment (APNA), an annual school-based survey of youth substance use and related behaviors. As part of his role with Harbor House, Smith had tried repeatedly to recruit schools to offer the survey. Yet denial was strong: school administrators would often say that they didn’t think they had a problem with substance misuse at their school—and politely decline to participate.

In those cases, Smith would turn to Jamerson, Ludwig, and other Boys and Girls Club staff. Their children went to these schools. They knew the teachers and administrators, and could speak to the importance of gathering data about youth substance misuse. “Everybody knew who they were,” says Smith. “And in small town America, your reputation is everything. We had broad community buy-in because people thought, ‘Well if Deneisa and Chris supported it, it must be good for our kids.’”

Eventually, the administrators’ resistance would yield. In 2020-21, 0 students in Columbia County took the APNA survey<sup>1</sup>. In 2022-23, 290 students did<sup>2</sup>. “The schools that initially said no, after a

couple of years they began considering doing APNA,” says Smith. “And the Boys and Girls Club was monumental in that.”

Looking back, Ludwig believes the collaboration benefited youth and families and helped deliver needed resources and messaging. “The partnership let them know that there was assistance available,” he says. “People didn’t know what resources were available to them before that. We let them know that they were not alone.”

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Aging, Adult, and Behavioral Health Services and University of Arkansas at Little Rock MidSOUTH Center for Prevention and Training. (2021). *Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment Survey, Columbia County Profile Report*.
- <sup>2</sup> Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Aging, Adult, and Behavioral Health Services and University of Arkansas at Little Rock MidSOUTH Center for Prevention and Training. (2022). *Arkansas Prevention Needs Assessment Survey, Columbia County Profile Report*.  
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