



Prevention Collaboration in Action

Grantee
Success Stories

In Rural Idaho, Prevention is Everywhere

Kamiah is a small city of 1,200 people, tucked inside the eastern edge of the Nez Perce Reservation in north-central Idaho. It's a place where prevention happens everywhere.

It happens during afterschool programs, when young children learn how to build healthy habits. It happens during Kamiah's annual YouthFest, when adults learn about substance use treatment and recovery services while their children go on carnival rides. It happens at teen centers, in the classroom, and at city hall.

But it wasn't always like this. In 2017, Kamiah confronted high rates of drinking and cannabis use among its teens and young adults. Findings from Kamiah's [PRIDE Risk and Protective Factor](#) student perception survey that year found that 16% of youth in Kamiah reported drinking alcohol in the past 30 days; 8.6% reported using cannabis.¹ Social norms around substance use were also permissive. There simply wasn't a culture of prevention.

In response, a group of concerned community members formed the [Upriver Youth Leadership Council](#) (UYLC), an organization that centers the voices of young people in prevention efforts. Since its founding in 2017, UYLC has grown into a major prevention provider in Kamiah, operating a number of programs designed to strengthen protective factors such as connectedness, and reduce risk factors such as perception of harm. These programs include a K-6 afterschool program, a teen center, and a community center for people recovering from substance misuse.



Ribbon cutting at the brand new Teen Center in downtown Kamiah

UYLC has changed norms and behaviors around substance use in this rural community. Now, prevention is everyone's priority.

“Everybody has been receptive,” says Sharlene Johnson, director of UYLC. “We have community buy in.”

Here are some of the ways Kamiah has built the partnerships needed to make and sustain this shift.

FIND A CHAMPION

The first meeting of UYLC brought together community leaders representing different populations within Kamiah. At the time, Johnson was a program manager with the Idaho Office of Drug Policy. Joining her at the meeting was the principal of Kamiah High School, the program director for Kamiah’s afterschool program, a local pastor, two probation officers, and the director of Nez Perce Students for Success, a health promotion program for Nez Perce youth. Together, they were connected to multiple groups across the community, including students, system-involved youth, people in recovery, and members of the Nez Perce tribe.



Sharlene Johnson wears a personalized Santa hat during UYLC’s Old Fashioned Christmas celebration

With her deep knowledge of prevention, Johnson became the driving force behind UYLC. Within a year, she had created a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) to guide UYLC’s prevention efforts. She also led the push to establish UYLC as a non-profit, which would allow the organization to apply for grant funding. Now, UYLC draws upon multiple funding streams—including from SAMHSA, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, and the State of Idaho—to do its work.

Johnson knew the science behind prevention but her drive to build a prevention-focused coalition in Kamiah was also deeply personal. She had experienced the effects of substance misuse in her own life and knew the toll it could take.

“I didn’t want to go through that again, and I didn’t want any other parent to go through that,” she says. “I have a driving passion to make sure that the kids in my community are healthy. And so, I don’t give up. If you tell me I can’t do something, I say, ‘Watch me.’”

ENGAGE MEMBERS OF YOUR FOCUS POPULATION

According to Johnson, the creation of the YAB was essential if the UYLC was going to have a real impact on substance use rates and norms. In her role at Idaho’s Office of Drug Policy, Johnson

worked with coalitions across the state—and saw first-hand the necessity of involving youth in prevention efforts.

“For anything with the teens to be successful, we needed to have their input on it,” she says. She recognized that it wouldn’t work for adults to identify the prevention programming needs for young people. Teenagers in Kamiah also needed to share their own concerns and desires.

The YAB currently offers students in grades 7 through 12 an opportunity to get directly involved in substance use prevention. In just the past few years, the YAB has led a peer-to-peer youth conference, organized school assemblies about prevention, and coordinated a series of “sticker shock” events to promote awareness and conversation. YAB members have even raised concerns about underage cannabis use with school administrators, which resulted in changes to the school’s drug testing policies.

Youth in the YAB are treated as true prevention partners. They work closely with UYLC staff to develop youth-focused programs around health and prevention and are invited to attend all Council meetings. When funding allows, they also attend statewide prevention conferences, where they talk about their initiatives while learning from peers.

“They are coalition members, so they do their part,” says Johnson. “They're always at everything that we do.”

USE A STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

[SAMHSA’s Strategic Prevention Framework](#) (SPF) guides all of UYLC’s work. Johnson refers often to the framework and encourages her staff to do so, as well. Especially when it comes to data.

“Any time someone approaches me with a new idea for a prevention activity or campaign for UYLC, I say, ‘let’s look at the data,’” she says. “The data has to support [the need for a new intervention].”

Education about the SPF often happens at coalition meetings, where members explore data on emerging trends and patterns, and plan their programming accordingly. Meetings are also an important time to build the readiness of members to engage in prevention efforts—a key



Kamiah City Council meeting with YAB advocates

element of the SPF's capacity-building step. This is particularly important given the range of programming the coalition leads and diversity of its membership.

Centering the SPF is so important that Johnson has even introduced it to the young people in her coalition.

"The kids in YAB know [about the SPF] and why we do what we do," she says. "All the dominoes connect."

BE CREATIVE

UYLC prioritizes upstream prevention—that is, creating positive, healthy conditions that allow young people to live healthy lives. These "conditions" come in many shapes and sizes.

For example, in 2020, Jace Sams, then a member of the YAB, came to Johnson with an idea. He wanted to turn the city's old public tennis courts into a place where youth could go skateboard. The courts had fallen into disrepair, becoming a preferred site for drug use. A skatepark, Sams explained, would be a positive place for young people to hang out. It would give young people something to do other than smoke or drink.

Johnson encouraged him to pursue the idea for his high school senior project. In their proposal to the city, Sams and Johnson emphasized the potential prevention and health benefits of building a new recreation spot for youth. A skatepark would reduce illicit behavior,ⁱⁱ encourage exercise, and provide a safe space for physical risk-taking. It would help young people cope with stressⁱⁱⁱ and build friendships. And in providing a space for youth to learn new tricks, the skatepark could also be a place where young skaters learn persistence and resilience.

"I helped the city see that maybe building a skatepark seemed weird for Kamiah, but it's what the kids want, and there are not enough things for the kids to do, so why not?" recalls Johnson.

City leaders approved. They donated the land for the project and UYLC led the design process. With help from Johnson, Sams even landed a \$5,000 grant from the Tony Hawk Foundation to help fund the park's construction. On May 6, 2023, [the park opened with great fanfare](#).

MAKE IT EASY FOR PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED

UYLC also advances its prevention goals by making it easy for people in the community to support those in need.

For example, when UYLC decided to build a community garden, they reached out to local businesses and partners for donations. One business donated enough land for a greenhouse and large garden plot. Another donated fencing. The regional behavioral health board provided funding for an irrigation system. The garden is now not only a source of community pride, but also provides fresh produce for UYLC's afterschool programs.

UYLC's major partners include the city government, city health system, and many local businesses. But individuals who donate food, clothing, and other items of need to UYLC also fill a critical role.



UYLC and YAB members host lunch fundraiser with inspiring prevention messages to support the Kamiah Teen Center

Johnson connects this community support to UYLC's prevention goals. In helping to address people's basic needs, UYLC is fostering social connectedness and resilience while reducing desperation. All of these are protective factors against risky behaviors and substance abuse.

"If somebody in the community needs a pair of boots or a winter coat, UYLC just has to put the word out. The next day, we'll have ten pairs of boots sitting on our front step. I don't know a need that hasn't been filled."

WORK ACROSS THE CONTINUUM OF CARE

Early on, UYLC recognized that prevention efforts had to include people across the substance use continuum. So it built out a number of services for people in recovery, including free access to the opioid overdose reversal medication naloxone, career development services, and a food pantry.

"We discovered that if we were going to prevent substance use in our kids, then we had to make sure they had healthy adults at home. So, we formed a recovery committee, and that committee had people in active recovery on it," says Johnson. The committee organizes sober events; it also disseminates information about UYLC's recovery services and support.

UYLC also recognized that its staff needed to be fluent across the continuum of care to have an impact. Johnson says that staff are “cross-trained”—“prevention workers learn about recovery, and recovery staff understand prevention strategies.” UYLC’s staff pool resources, expertise, and networks across prevention and recovery activities. And at community events where UYLC has a presence, staff disseminate information about both prevention and recovery, too.

The unifying message is that UYLC is there to support everyone in Kamiah who wants to build a substance-free community.

“We’re in a community and we work as a community,” says Johnson. “People appreciate the holistic approach. They recognize that prevention and recovery are interconnected. By working together, prevention and recovery strengthen community bonds and create a supportive environment for those in need.”

REFERENCES

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