

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader

In January 2008, the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services awarded Strategic Prevention Framework grants to 14 Kansas community partnerships to support efforts to prevent and reduce underage drinking.

One of those partnerships was the Liberal Area Coalition for Families, and since that time, local community leaders have been in the planning process to develop community-based plans to impact underage drinking.

In an e-mail Monday, coalition director Elizabeth Stamper told officials about new monies being awarded to the Liberal organization.

“We are in our implementation stage,” she told the Leader Tuesday.

“We were awarded \$159,790. It’s a three and a half year award, so each year, we’ll receive that \$159,000, and the last year, we’ll receive approximately \$79,000 for the half year.”

Stamper said she and sector leaders have been in a nine-month planning period that started in March 2008 for the Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant for the prevention of underage drinking.

“It’s federal money that’s given to states,” she said. “We’re the third group of states that’s gotten money. We were asked by the federal government as a state to identify what causes our youth to become part of our criminal system.”

Stamper said the number one thing found from research and statistics is that the first indicator is underage drinking.

“Not to say that drugs and other things aren’t a part of that, but that’s one of the first things that youth do and then go get into trouble,” she said.

With the new money received, Stamper said the coalition can now go into the implementation stage, and she said part of that process includes doing compliance checks.

“We bring in underage youth to purchase alcohol at a retail store,”

she said. “We’re doing responsible beverage service training to hopefully prevent them from selling during those compliance checks and anytime for that matter.”

This will help train employees and management of alcohol retail stores, according to Stamper.

“We are doing four additional sobriety and safety checkpoints, two with the Liberal Police Department and two with the sheriff’s office, that they both have agreed to,” she said.

Stamper said compliance checks and sobriety checkpoints will likely be in the hands of the LPD and the sheriff’s office.

“We’re the ultimate beginning of where that money starts, so we’ll be in constant contact with them,” she said.

Stamper said responsible beverage training is a matter of scheduling.

“I don’t foresee that as a big issue,” she said.

Another program will involve Big Brothers Big Sisters with bigs in the schools, Stamper said.

“We haven’t yet nailed down the age range, but we’re looking at juniors and seniors and fourth and fifth graders,” she said. “It will be a year-long mentoring that can be used for the community service hours.”

Stamper said sector leaders are also looking at a Capturing Kids Hearts parents program.

“We mirror what our high school is doing as far as behavior management and then giving that tool to our parents to use in their households as well,” she said. “It’s basically an organizational discipline – an effective way to run your household. That will be by invitation.”

The 26th Judicial District’s Juvenile Corrections and Prevention Services office has been working to develop programs to keep youth out of the courtrooms, and Stamper said she has been in touch with director Gena Burnett. This means there could be a possibility of the coalition working with JCAPS to detour youth from alcohol usage.

“She kind of knows what’s going on with us,” Stamper said of Burnett.

“She probably doesn’t know the exact details up to the point.”

Stamper said the group of sector leaders did include a representative from JCAPS, but that has changed since the beginning stages of the SPF SIG grant.

“We’re hoping to get another representative back as the sector leader,” she said. “We would cooperate with them as much as we can.”

Obviously, they know our youth or at least, the youth in trouble. It would be important for us to keep them in the know.”

Stamper said cooperatives are being formed with USD 480, the LPD, the Seward County Sheriff’s office and Seward County United Way, as well as all of its agencies.

“The community college has been a big representative and the tech school,” she said. “We’ve got a lot of people on our board that represent a wide variety of areas in our community.”

There are 12 sectors on the SPF SIG grant, and Stamper said some of the leaders in those sectors have changed since the beginning of the grant.

“After a year-long commitment, some people had to change due to job changes or whatever was going on in their life,” she said. “Out of the 12, we’ve had I think seven who’ve been consistent. Out of the board, we haven’t had any people leave. We’ve just had people come, so we’ve been pretty consistent.”

The next step for the grant will likely be seen on a community level towards the end of February, according to Stamper.

“I have training that I go to for three days in Topeka the first week of February,” she said. “Hopefully, that first week, we’ll receive our last chunk of the planning grant money and the first chunk of the implementation money.”

Stamper said at that point, the coalition will likely have most of the people in position to run the program.

“We have agreements signed with the people that we need to have them signed with,” she said. “It’s just a matter of waiting for the payment to start and get the ball rolling.”

Since the coalition will not receive its implementation money until likely February, Stamper said that stage of the grant has yet to begin.

“We have people trained,” she said. “The sheriff’s department, the Liberal Police Department have been informed and signed agreements with us that they will do this. Big Brothers Big Sisters is advertising for a director right now.”

Stamper said everything is going in the right direction, however.

“When we get our first payment, we’ll be on the ground, ready to run,” she said. “It’s just a matter of crossing the last t’s and dotting i’s. We’ve got an official letter that we have been awarded the implementation funding. We need to sign it and give it all back and go through that process.”