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Project Bald Eagle Honored as Exemplary Health Program

Project Bald Eagle – A product of the Heroin Task Force, an organization comprising diverse community groups collaborating to address rising opioid use in Lycoming County, was presented today with a Rural Health Program of the Year award by the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health.

The award recognizes “an exemplary health program that addresses an identified need in a rural community.”

The criteria considered include demonstrating unique, creative and innovative approaches; ensuring access to the community or intended population with no physical, economic or social barriers; using community resources as part of the planning and evaluation process; and demonstrating a significant benefit to the target population as measured by evaluation.

Established in May, Project Bald Eagle, the successor to the Heroin Task Force in Lycoming County, is a nonprofit organization that seeks to reduce drug-related deaths and combat the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs by focusing on prevention and early intervention. The group features cooperation among a variety of community groups, local and state law enforcement agencies, and first responders.

Lisa Davis, director of the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, bestowed the award today in a ceremony held at Pennsylvania College of Technology’s Thompson Professional Development Center.

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Committee chairs for Project Bald Eagle accepted the award on behalf of the organization. They are: Christine Boyles, Community Education/Outreach; the Rev. Andrew France, Faith Based; Margaret "Peg" Wesneski, Human Services; Dr. Todd W. Fausnaught, Medical; David Wright, Youth Development; Vincent J. Matteo, Business; and Michael D. Pawlik, Education.

"The best way to fight this epidemic is to stop it before it starts – to stop young people from the dabbling or experimenting that can too quickly lead to trouble and addiction," said Wright, director of student services for the Williamsport Area School District. "The most effective messengers to convince youth to refrain from that experimentation is other youth, armed with good information supporting the reality that the majority of young people are not involved in substance use. This approach can reset beliefs from 'It's OK, everybody's doing it' to the accurate perception that the social norm – the expectation – of the majority is to avoid substances."

"The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new. Socrates Communities are responsible for our own health," said Wesneski. "Bringing the community together to promote health and education regarding prevention falls upon schools, agencies, government, hospitals, churches and all community members. We are all responsible to promote this change. Project Bald Eagle is the beginning point for changes to occur."

Gary Tennis, secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, praised Project Bald Eagle for its commitment to communitywide collaboration in the pursuit of its goals.

"Pennsylvanians living in Lycoming County are fortunate to have such leadership in Project Bald Eagle in battling the worst overdose death epidemic this state has ever seen," Tennis said in a congratulatory letter. "Helen Keller said, 'Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.' I've learned many things in the years I've been working to help improve the lives of people suffering from the disease of addiction, and one of the most important is that partnerships and collaboration are essential. Pennsylvania's addiction and overdose death epidemic is so big and pervasive that we must work together if we are to stem the rising tide of overdose deaths and help people to recover from the disease of addiction."

Project Bald Eagle's approach is based on a public health program started in North Carolina known as Project Lazarus.

"The Project Lazarus model and premise is that communities are responsible for their own health, and addressing prescription drug and heroin substance use issues requires a balanced approach of prevention, intervention and treatment," said Project Lazarus President/CEO Fred Wells Brason II. "The stakeholders and community sectors of Lycoming County have been collaborating and collectively are having an impact. Congratulations for receiving the Pennsylvania Rural Health Program of the Year Award. Well-deserved!"

Project Bald Eagle launched earlier this year with financial support from Pennsylvania College of Technology, Lycoming College, Susquehanna Health and Lycoming County.

Board members for Project Bald Eagle are: Pennsylvania College of Technology President Davie Jane Gilmour, chair; Lycoming County President Judge Nancy L. Butts, vice chair; Lycoming College President Kent C. Trachte, treasurer; Susquehanna Health President/CEO Steven P. Johnson, secretary; state Sen. Gene Yaw, R-23rd; Lycoming County District Attorney Eric R. Linhardt; Jeffrey W. Rauff, Lycoming County Commissioner; Shea Madden, director of the West Branch Drug & Alcohol Abuse Commission; Dr. Todd W. Fausnaught, Susquehanna Health physician; the Rev. Andrew France; Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce President/CEO Vincent J. Matteo; East Lycoming School District Superintendent Michael D. Pawlik; and Donnie Benson, recovering community member.

The executive director of Project Bald Eagle is Beth McMahon, professor, Lock Haven University Health Science Department.

Formed in 1991, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, www.porh.psu.edu/porh, is a partnership among the federal government, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and The Pennsylvania State University. The office is one of 50 state offices of rural health in the nation funded through the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy in the U.S Department of Health and Human Services.

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