

# Area Youth Trained in Sidekicks

*Dawn Roberts*

## Summary

Over 50 Easton youth were recently trained in the Sidekicks program by Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP), Tobacco Prevention Services. The Sidekicks program provides teens with the tools they need to be successful in holding respectful, helpful conversations around quitting with peers that use tobacco products. The teens received information about tobacco's harmful effects and the different ways nicotine can be delivered as well as ways to refer tobacco users to resources if they wish to quit.

## Challenge

With the recent popularity in e-cigarettes among youth, now is an important time to intervene. Most e-cigarettes contain nicotine, which causes addiction, may harm brain development, and could lead to continued tobacco product use among youth. Youth are vulnerable to social and environmental influences to use tobacco; messages and images that make tobacco use appealing to them are everywhere. Tobacco companies spend about \$1 Million dollars every hour on advertising, most of which is geared towards youth.

It's important to work with youth to educate them about tobacco. Currently nearly 9 out of 10 smokers started by age 18, among those youths who persist in smoking, a third will die prematurely. Youth are sensitive to nicotine and can feel dependent earlier than adults, as a result, 3 out of 4 teen smokers will smoke as adults.

Avoiding or stopping smoking is one of the best things a teen can do for a lifetime of good health; education and skills to navigate peer pressure is key to success.

## Solution

The process involved ACAP Tobacco Prevention Services partnering with a local middle school to target a group of youth for the training. They met with Easton Middle High School teacher Bryan Shaw to talk about the program and discuss which grades he felt would benefit from it. Mr. Shaw was taken through the curriculum and made aware of what would take place with each group. It was decided that grades 7-9 would be the target and after discussing class length, several dates were set up for the trainings.



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## Results

Seventh, eighth and ninth grade students became certified through 12 separate trainings over a two-week period. 53 middle school students successfully completed the Sidekicks program and have received training on why to quit tobacco, how to start a conversation, how to use active listening skills, resources for quitting and much more. Students reported feeling confident using these skills and more prepared if they should need to have a conversation with a tobacco user or any other hard topic.

*“The most helpful thing I learned was how to start a conversation with someone that smokes, I feel I’m ready to be a Sidekick, I loved the training.”*

*7th grade student, Easton Middle School*

### Sustaining Success

The goal of the Sidekicks program is to arm youth with the skills needed to approach peers about risky behavior, including tobacco with a none confrontational approach. These 53 students are now equipped with these skills and the knowledge around the many forms of nicotine delivery and addictive properties. Through trainings such as this the hope is that teens will be armed with not only the ability to talk to a peer about a negative behavior but have the knowledge to not engage in one themselves. It is important to reach teens with this positive messaging early to prevent them from getting addicted to tobacco at a young age. With the constant fight against big tobacco and the new products continually being introduced our jobs as educators is in constant motion, but the message of tobacco prevention stands strong, tobacco prevention programs are highly effective and have cut youth smoking rates in half or even more. With trainings such as this we now have 53 more crusaders hitting the road to spread our important message to youth and beyond. So let’s continue to educate teens in hopes of a tobacco free future for all Maine youth that will truly make a better life for all.



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