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NEWS

Eburg TeenScreen program faces backlash

ANDREW SCOTT
 Pocono Record Writer
 August 05, 2006

STROUDSBURG — Monroe County coordinators of TeenScreen, a program started by Columbia University to offer screenings to high school students for symptoms of problems that can lead to suicide, are not immune to organized national opposition to the program.

Many parents, some mental health experts and others across the country say TeenScreen falsely diagnoses children with depression and other problems leading to suicide. They say the program then prescribes or "pushes" ineffective antidepressants and other drugs on these children so that pharmaceutical companies can profit.

Also prevalent is concern over whether TeenScreen actually helps put self-destructive thoughts in children's heads with screening questionnaires reportedly asking, "Have you ever tried or thought about trying suicide?"

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far has collected more than 8,000 signatures nationwide. The petition can be found at <http://www.petitiononline.com/TSscreen/petition.html>.

"It would be more beneficial for parents to actually talk to their teenagers on a daily basis....and make them feel like they have a family than to screen these kids like test subjects," Judy Aron of Connecticut wrote this week in an e-mail to the Pocono Record, echoing public observation that there is no concrete proof of the program successfully reducing the suicide rate among teens.

The e-mail was in response to a recent article about a 17-year-old Pocono Mountain High School graduate who apparently shot and killed herself in her Canadensis home. The article mentioned that Sara Camaerei, a Stroudsburg doctor of psychology, and others brought TeenScreen to Monroe County in response to a rash of earlier student suicides at that same school.

Pocono Mountain, Pleasant Valley, Stroudsburg and East Stroudsburg high schools and the Monroe Career and Technical Institute last year took part in TeenScreen.

So far, East Stroudsburg and MCTI, the two most active participants, are the only schools continuing with the program this fall. East Stroudsburg has entered a contract with program coordinators while MCTI has received grant money to continue for another year.

"We want to clear up a lot of public misconception about what the program does and how it operates," Camaerei said.

The program is aimed at ninth-graders, since that's the age at which children are most likely to start showing symptoms of depression, anxiety and other problems that can lead to suicide, Camaerei said.

"First, we're not affiliated with the pharmaceutical industry," she said. "Second, we don't 'screen.' We 'offer screenings.'"

"The screenings are voluntary, not mandatory," Camaerei said. "We need both the signed consent of the parent and the signed assent of the student before we administer a screening. And we double-check signatures that look forged by verifying with the parents."

There are various versions of screening questionnaires with different questions on each version, but all are confidential, she said. No one in the public is supposed to know what any of the questions are unless the information is spread by those administering the screenings which is illegal or by students who have been through the process.

"Third and probably most important, we don't diagnose, treat or medicate anyone or recommend any treatment," Camaerei said. "We look for symptoms of depression, anxiety and other problems that can lead to suicide."

"If we find what we believe to be such symptoms, we suggest to the students and their families that they be referred to other mental health experts out in the community for further evaluation," she said. "Those other experts will then make the final determination on whether a student does have problems and how to treat them. If medication is needed, only a licensed psychiatrist can prescribe it."

She added that experts are willing to work on a sliding-scale basis with families based on their finances and that uninsured families are referred to Monroe County Mental Health Resources.

"We researched TeenScreen when it was introduced to us and our staff did

an excellent job in laying the groundwork for our students to understand what it is and how it works," said Dr. Douglas Arnold, assistant superintendent of the East Stroudsburg School District. "We're very

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supportive of anything that seems like it can genuinely benefit our students. That's why we've entered the contract with Dr. Camaerei and her staff."

The East Stroudsburg district will pay TeenScreen coordinators to offer screenings on a quarterly basis to ninth-graders at its South and North high schools. The cost to the district is not to exceed \$3,200 a year, Arnold said.

"I'm not sure how all the public misconception got started," Camaerei said. "The rules are pretty clear as to how the program is supposed to be run. It might be that school districts in other counties or states vary in how they do it, but we here in Monroe go pretty much by the book."

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