

Social Norms project combats misperceptions of alcohol, drug use

The Optimist Club of Merrill recently donated \$500 to the Lincoln County Drug Free Coalition in support of the Merrill Social Norms project.

The mission of the Coalition is to bring various sectors of the community together to reduce the use/abuse of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs among youth, and over time, among adults. One of the projects supported by the Coalition is the Social Norms project in both Merrill and Tomahawk.

When asked, students usually overestimate the percentage of youth who use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. When they overestimate, they justify use by their peers and are more likely to use themselves.

Based on Social Norms theory which states that individual behaviors are influenced by misperceptions of how peers think and act, the Social Norms project utilizes a marketing campaign to correct students and adults perceptions of the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. For youth in particular, peer influences and perceptions have been found to



Trina DeLasky (left), President of the Optimist Club of Merrill presented a donation for \$500 to the Lincoln County Drug Free Coalition in support of the Merrill Social Norms project. Accepting this donation on behalf of the coalition is Debbie Moellendorf, Chair of the Lincoln County Drug Free Coalition.

be more influential in shaping individual choices for behavior than other factors. The theory states that overestimating problem behaviors discourages healthy behaviors. Correcting these misperceptions by promoting actual norms can result in decreased negative behaviors and increased prevalence of healthy protective behaviors.

There has been a consistent trend of decreased perception of peer alcohol use behavior among Merrill High School students from 2007 when the project began to 2014 as measured by a decrease in perception of alcohol as the typical socializing beverage, perception of students driving after drinking, and perception of peers who have drunk alcohol in past 30 days. As measured in the 2012 parent and staff survey, the perception of alcohol use being the "norm" among MHS students has also dropped by 25% for Merrill High School parents/guardians and 46% for Merrill High School staff. Between 2007 and 2014, the actual reported 30-day use of alcohol has dropped 10% among Merrill High School students.

This data demonstrates that by marketing true norms we are changing perceptions which leads to an increase in healthy behaviors. To learn more about the Lincoln County Drug Free Coalition, visit our website at <http://lincoln.uwex.edu/dfc> or contact Debbie Moellendorf at 715-539-1077.