

Music

Introduction

Aisaiah (0:01)

Welcome to Episode 2 of the ConnectED podcast, co-produced by the Community Data Clinic, your guide to unlocking resources and opportunities in East Central Illinois. I'm Aisaiah, and alongside me is Harshi, your hosts on this journey.

First off, we'll show you some cool things happening in our community. Think of it as a bunch of resources—programs and projects—that can make a real difference in your life.

Then, we've got some amazing stories to share. Real people, just like you and me, who've had their lives changed by these programs we're talking about. And don't worry, we're not going to leave you make them work for you.

So, get ready for a journey with us, we're here to connect you with exciting opportunities, share stories from people just like you, and give you the information necessary to show you how you can be a part of it all.

Harshi (0:54)

In today's episode, we will be chatting with Breana Buford about the many youth programs and resources available in Vermillion County. Breana Buford is a site coordinator at Project Success of Vermillion County. She works with elementary aged children and always has a program for students that are in middle school and high school.

Breana is passionate about the work she does and wants to make a difference for the youth in her community. She is determined to motivate and encourage youth to be the best of themselves.

Harshi (1:26)

So, uh, just to get things started, Breana if you could introduce yourself to us.

Breana (1:31)

Of course! Hi, I am Breana. I am a site coordinator at Project success of Vermillion County.

Harshi (1:35)

So, Breana, tell us about what inspired you to focus on serving elementary, middle, and high school students and how do these programs differ in their approaches for each age group?

Breana (1:46)

So, I actually grew up going to after school programs when I was in elementary school, so I kinda was familiar with how they run, how they operate, but once I got to high school, um, after school programming and just stuff for us to do was very limited. So that's why I like working with elementary and high school because it gets to offer something both for them.

With elementary, we like to focus on a lot of social emotional learning, or you know, controlling their emotions, exposing them to new things. Well then high school, we focus on like life skills, college,

and career readiness, and exposing them to new pathways like trades or college and just um...motivating them to figure out what they want to do after high school.

Harshi (2:31)

Can you share with us some of the impactful youth programs currently available in Vermillion County and how they contribute to the communities development?

Breana (2:40)

Yes! So, we have our program which is called After-Hours program, it's funded by the RPSA grant which is Reimagining Public Safety Act, and one of our main goals is giving kids a place to go after maybe all the programs in Vermillion County is over.

They also have a program called 'You Glow'; it's at another community center and they do a lot of the same, similar things like we do, um, but they do more bringing people in, teaching kids about finances, and they take them on a big college tour, so they have that.

The high school has a project success program at their high school, um, we have one in Westville, Georgetown; we used to have one in Oakwood, but unfortunately with the budget cuts in the State of Illinois...that one got taken away.

They also have something with the 'Peer Court', that students are able to do, um, they have a program at the Boys and Girls Club, but that's only for elementary age, uh, school kids. And they also have a program at the YMCA, where they do after care with the schools.

Harshi (3:42)

Can you tell us more about the 'After Hours Violence Prevention Program' and what you guys do?

Breana (3:48)

Yes! So, we target middle school and high school students from the age of like 12 to 17, and we do a lot of things with them. We do a lot of curriculums, so one of the curriculums we do, we have a lady that works from the state representatives come in every Monday and do violence prevention training with them called 'Making the Peace'. So just, lets them know how they can, good conflict resolution skills, how they can deescalate situations.

We also have people come in and teaching them college and career readiness, they were able to make their own business plan; We also have somebody coming back in, hopefully, they can write their own book and publish it.

So, we do a lot of life skills, we teach them how to cook, we go on college tours, field trips. We bring people in. It's just really a safe space for kids.

It's held at our local YMCA, so the good thing about that is they have a swimming pool, they have a gym, and they have the whole facility that they can use and um it's kinda just a, our goal is to create a safe space, safe programming to kinda get the kids off the street. 'Cause we know its late, and they really have nothing to do, so. And we also try to help them with their future, and just motivate them.

Harshi (4:52)

Absolutely. That sounds great. Can you share with us some specific activities or projects within these programs that have received positive feedback or results?

Breana (5:03)

Yes, of course! One of the things that we did that the kids absolutely loved was a money management activity.

So, each student had their own career card and showed them how much they made, how much they had to pay with like their insurance or student debt they had, and then they had a sheet where they had to pick what kind of car they wanted, what kind of house they wanted, and it had numbers, and they had that set amount of money.

So, it was so cool seeing the kids budget, seeing what they want to do with their leftover money. They really love that activity.

They also like a lot of hands-on things, so, we make candles—they love that. They love being able to customize their candle, um, we've made keychains—they love that as well.

And we just do a lot of different things, we do something called 'Music Therapy', so we play different music, and different instrumentals, and the kids can write about how they feel, and what kind of song they think this is, and just different things like that.

They also love basketball, they love playing flag football, some of our kids do yoga. So, we just have a lot of different activities for the kids, and they just seem to really like being more hands-on than anything.

Harshi (6:06)

Yeah! I really appreciate like the amount of, the range too because like not all kids are gonna like playing...

Breana

Exactly!

Harshi

...games, some of them like sitting down and listening to music, or relaxing and doing yoga.

Breana

Yes!

Harshi

So, it's nice to have like a good range of things you can, the kids can find exactly what they enjoy.

Breana (6:22)

Yes. Yes. And we, one of the things that I really try to implement is student voice. So, I'll ask them, 'Hey, what is something that you guys would like to do?' or 'What's a career that you guys would be interested in?' that way I can plan activities around that, and maybe get somebody that works in that field to come and speak with them.

So, a lot of these activities are really activities that the students have coming up with and stuff that they're interested in.

Harshi

Absolutely, yeah. That's wonderful.

Aisaiah (6:47)

I was wondering if you could talk about like the experience of watching these kids grow up and seeing how much they've changed throughout the years and throughout these programs?

Breana (6:56)

So, I've been working with children since I was 16 years old. It was one of my first jobs, so I've seen a lot of my kids grow up from being in kindergarten to being in middle school and it's honestly such a beautiful thing.

I remember when I left for college and I came back, and some of these kids were in middle school & high school, they were playing football, they were going to state with basketball, they're playing volleyball, they're cheerleading.

So, it's such a beautiful thing and every time I see one of my past students, they just run up to me and give me the biggest hug and honestly that's the best feeling ever. Just to know that you're loved, and you're appreciated and what you do matters to these children and the families, as well.

Like I tell people a lot of times, you know, we're not only here for the children, we're here for the families as well. And so, I've developed a lot of close relationships with the families and just being able to be a part of the children's lives and seeing them growing up and become young adults, honestly, it's just amazing.

Aisaiah (7:52)

Could you also talk to me about like special events with families or also how like throughout the youth programming you involve the families? Kinda just as a way to showcase their work, see what they're up to and to connect with them?

Breana (8:06)

Yes! So, every year at the beginning of the year, we survey families. So, it's a survey that is from one of our reporting systems. So, it has things that their interested in, things that they wanna learn, things that they're not interested in. So, it really kinda gives us a feel on how to structure our family programming for that year.

So, one thing that we do, that we absolutely love, we participate in the National Lights On After School Event, so every year we put on our own event.

So, this year we had a Halloween bash, and families were able to come out and see the artwork that their kids had done, they were able to create their own artwork, they could sign up for our programs if they wanted to. So that is one of the events we do every year to showcase what we're doing at our after-school program.

Another thing that we do, we have a back-to-school bash at the end of the summer just to kinda get everybody back in the mood to going back to school and It's a really big recruitment event as well.

We have a lot of people coming out, signing up, we always have free food, give away school supplies, and then we also do things like, um, we do like resume building for the families, maybe someone wants to get another job and they wanna work on their resume. We have professionals come in and give them tips and tricks and help them on their resume.

Another thing we did was a financial literacy class, where we had people from the Salvation Army, people from local banks come in, teach them about credit, how to save and how to build a house. So, we also do fun events, but then we also do events that can really change some of the families lives, in a sense.

Intermission – Music

Aisaiah (9:41)

Alright, folks, it's time for a quick break in the middle of today's episode. But don't worry, it's for a fantastic reason! We're thrilled to introduce you to some incredible after-school and summer programs for the young ones in Vermillion County and the Champaign County. Stick around to learn more about these enriching opportunities, and if you're ready to skip ahead and explore, check out the link provided in this episode's notes.

In Vermillion County, the options are abundant. The YMCA Danville offers after-school programs until 5:30 PM, and over the summer they offer their AMBUCS Summer Camp tailored for students with disabilities. Meanwhile, this summer the Danville Area Community College will open its doors to college-bound aspirations through diverse camps ranging from basketball to art studios.

Don't miss out on the engaging days offered by the Vermillion County Conservation District which will enable you to get out in nature and engage with the world beyond them.

And also, don't miss out on mentorship opportunities facilitated by University of Illinois Extension 4-H Clubs which allow youth to get involved in community service and receive mentorship from peers around them.

For bookworms, Hoopston Public Library offers regular after-school programming and a summer reading club.

For those residing in Champaign County or Urbana-Champaign area, the array of options continues to impress. The University of Illinois hosts the FAB Lab Summer Camps, fostering creativity and innovation. The Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club introduces Street College Prep Academy and afterschool programming, nurturing academic excellence and personal growth.

In addition, we have another program called 'Dreaam' which stands as a beacon for promoting a college-bound and career-oriented identity from age 3 to 24.

But wait, there's more! Dive into the exciting YMCA YCAMP Summer Program, the educational haven of Urbana Neighborhood Connections Center, and the adventurous Champaign County Forest Preserves Summer Camps.

For detailed information on these remarkable programs, visit the link provided in this episode's notes. Empower your child's future today with a variety of enriching summer programs.

End – Intermission

Aisaiah (11:54)

Um Yeah! So I wanted to follow-up with a question about you know some of the potential challenges that you face with providing youth programming within Vermillion County.

In previous episodes, we've talked a lot about Champaign County and resources; I thought it'd be helpful to expand upon, you know, some of those unique situations that you find yourself in within a much more rural county.

Breana (12:20)

So, we are very rural, so a lot of times when we are looking for either people or resources, we have to outsource them. Maybe to like Champaign, or sometimes even out of the state of Illinois, and that's a challenge within itself because in our grant we have to stay within the state of Illinois when we are doing certain things.

So, it's definitely a challenge; we do a lot of research, a lot of research, a lot of using our connections and networking. We are very active in the community of Vermillion County, and there's a lot of resources that we don't know about, and that is why it is so important to network and get to know people that are in the community.

So, it's definitely a challenge like for instance, we wanted the kids to do swim lessons, and so we had to kinda like outsource because we don't have like a public pool—we have one that is supposed to be opening this summer, but you know, they are not going to be able to accommodate us the way that we would like, so. It's just little challenges like that, that we have to overcome, but we really rely on our community and our resources, and networking to help kinda solve some of these challenges.

Aisaiah (13:23)

Wow! Thank you for sharing that.

I was wondering maybe if you could talk about like your network? For me, again like, community development and all of that is very important, but like in, I guess like, in a sense of which, you're kinda pulling things together because of the lack of funding and like, how has your community supported you throughout like your process or your work?

Breana (13:44)

So, one thing about Vermillion County, we are very like close-knit, so, um we get a lot of support from the school districts—they are wonderful with helping us. Sometimes our programs may be delayed because of the state, so, some of our school districts jump in and really help us; they give us money to sustain the programs until we are able to get reimbursement back from the state.

So, relying on people like that, we have a lot of local non-profits, even we try to volunteer and help them out, so. We have a non-profit in Vermillion County called FairHope, they give out free clothes and shoes to families, so we volunteer there, helping them put their clothes up, and sort things and in return we can refer kids to there if we have a family in need, that needs clothing. We kinda help out each other, and kinda have each other's backs, um so. It's a lot of that going on in Vermillion county.

Aisaiah (14:41)

Earlier you mentioned that you do a lot of intensive or a lot of research on the families, I was wondering if you could talk about the research that you do and how it informs the programming that you output?

Breana (14:55)

Yes. So, a lot of times if a family comes to us with an issue and we don't know how to solve it, so that's when our research really comes into play. And a lot of our site coordinators bounce ideas off of each other, so that's also helpful.

And also, one of the things um, churches are very helpful as well. One of my programs is held at a church and they have been great.

Say if a family needs food, they have a blessing box right outside the church so we can refer them to that or there's different um food banks that we can refer them to or for instance, if they need like clothes, a lot of people don't know that there is Fair Hope in Vermillion County that will help families in need. So, we refer them there so, or if they may need help with a power bill, we refer them to Community Action or someplace like that so.

Sometimes we really have to search because we never wanna turn a family away without an answer so that's why we really go hard with researching and networking to get these families the help they need.

Aisaiah (15:56)

I have another question, this is just going to keep going on but so like you've pointed to a lot of the research you do and a lot of resources that families can tap into, then in my head I'm thinking of vermilion county—is a rural county and I'm thinking about the location of these resources.

What is it like getting people connected to resources, especially, you know, if they may be coming from one side of town to another. You know, how is that sort of coordinated?

Breana (16:28)

So, luckily since COVID you can really do a lot of things like without coming into the office, so a lot of times we um just give a family a phone number and they're able to call and get more information and see if this is something they would be able to do, you know, instead of like wasting gas or try to get public transportation across town and being told "No."

So, a lot of times stuff is hands-off, um so that's another good thing and also, we provide like bus passes too, so, if a family needs to get someplace, we have bus passes available that they can, that they can you know use to get where they need to go.

Aisaiah (17:10)

I was thinking about also like Vermillion County and its proximity to other counties. How do you tap into resources in other counties and is there any way you can kinda like bridge the gap between like let's say what resources exist in Champaign County or a county above?

Breana (17:28)

Um so, that's one thing that we have been working on is bridging that gap, just to see how you know we can bring resources that we don't have in our community over into Danville so that's Vermillion County as a whole.

So, that's something we've definitely been working on and thinking about, you know. Sometimes one of the roadblocks that we face is, if there is a resource outside of Vermillion County, they say you have to be residing in that county, so sometimes it's nothing that they can do for people that don't live inside of that county.

So, that's something we're working on. I think a lot of times it's just networking and getting our name out there because a lot of times people can help, but if they don't know where needs need to be met, it's kinda hard for that person to or that business to step in and kinda help out, so that's one thing that we have really been working on is like networking and getting our name out there.

Aisaiah (18:25)

As your last moment, we're going to wrap up this podcast, so if you have any shoutouts, any special final thoughts or any special words you have to share with the audience listening...Feel free to share!

Breana (18:38)

I would like to thank the CEO of Project Success Kimberly David for allowing me to do this. This has been great.

And I just want to say that I am a proud member of Vermillion County and I believe in its advancements, and I also am a true believer in after school programs and I just love what I do and I love that I get to make an impact on families and children, and I just hope one day that everybody can see the importance of after school programming.

Music**Conclusion****Aisaiah (19:15)**

And that's a wrap for today's episode of the Connected Podcast, co-sponsored by the Community Data Clinic! We want to extend our deepest gratitude to all those who have made this episode possible.

We sincerely appreciate the invaluable support received from the State of Illinois Broadband READY program, led by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity; the Chancellor's Call to Action Research Program to Address Racism & Social Injustice from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications; Technology Services; and the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

For detailed information on these remarkable programs, check out the link provided in the episode's notes.

We also want to express our heartfelt thanks to our community partners, including the Community Data Clinic, Cunningham Township Supervisor's Office, Champaign Urbana Public Health District,

Project Success, and the Housing Authority of Champaign County. Your collaboration has enriched our discussions and initiatives in profound ways.

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As always, we appreciate our listeners for tuning in. Be sure to subscribe for future episodes, and feel free to reach out with your feedback and suggestions.

Until next time, take care and stay tuned for more engaging discussions on the ConnectED Podcast!