

VISTA volunteers to work with local community

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KEITH WHITCOMB JR.

Staff Writer

BENNINGTON -- A pair of volunteers from a federal program will be attached to the local hospital for the next year, working with youth to address poverty and nutrition in the Bennington area.

Attached to hospital

Veronica Ariel, of Millville, Mass., and Nicole Rau, from North Clarendon, are with the Americorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). The group sends volunteers to live in the communities they serve and attaches them to a non-profit where they work to improve housing, education, and nutrition. In this case the non-profit partner is Southwestern Vermont Medical Center, said SVMC spokeswoman Eileen Druckenmiller. She said they will specifically work within the hospital's Community Health Improvement Department.

Rau said there will be groups of students recruited from Mount Anthony Union High School and Middle School, Arlington Memorial High School, and Grace Christian School over the course of this week. Rau said the idea is to have the students work on an education campaign that they largely determine. That may involve poster campaigns and presentations, but it could be nearly anything on topics related to public health, Rau said. The Great American Smokeout, for example, could be something they get involved with.

Ariel said she will be working with the hospital itself to improve patient outcomes.

Students from Southern Vermont College may also work with older high school students on digital media projects, one of them being Photovoice. Kiah Morris, community health improvement specialist at SVMC, said Photovoice has students look at their community's assets such as access to healthy food, physical recreation, and sidewalks to show how healthy it is or isn't.

Rau said one thing the students may help with is the expansion of the Bennington Recreation Center. Local citizens participating in the Community Visit Program, organized by the Vermont Council on Rural Development, recently identified that as a goal.

Ariel and Rau will be working through SVMC for the rest of the year, said Druckenmiller, but VISTA will be sending volunteers for the next two. What those volunteers do depends on funding. She said the projects VISTA volunteers start are intended to be ones that can run on their own once the volunteers' time is up.

"Health care is changing rapidly," said Morris. "Improving the basic health of our community is key to reducing the cost of health care because it lowers the need for health care. Poverty and poor community health have similar root causes. We are delighted that the Americorps program selected SVMC as a VISTA site."

According to Druckenmiller, Ariel and Rau are both recent college graduates. Ariel attended Pennsylvania State University and came away with a degree in health policy and administration while Rau went to The College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., and has a degree in psychology and sociology.

VISTA is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. It began in 1964 and joined with Americorps in 1993.