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FARMINGTON NEW MEXICO

Town hall meeting emphasizes teen dating safety

By Kurt Madar The Daily Times

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FARMINGTON — Teen dating violence got put on notice last night.

A town hall meeting to combat the issue attracted more than 100 people Thursday, and had organizers praising Farmington's commitment.

"Farmington is exemplary," said Anna Nelson, Executive Director of New Mexico Forum For Youth in Community. "It's making a tremendous effort not seen anywhere else in the state."

The meeting, held at the Sycamore Park Community Center, provided an informal forum for teens, parents, and community members to gain insight into an issue that affects one out of every 10 teens in Farmington.

"There are more than a hundred of you in this room right now," Nelson said. "That means that 10 of you are going through this right now."

Thursday's meeting was especially relevant because February is Teen Dating Violence and Awareness month, and the strong turnout had organizer Amber Valencia pleasantly surprised.

"We were hoping for this many, but you never know," Valencia said. "It helped that all the area health teachers offered extra credit."

The primary goal of the meeting was to provide teens and parents with the tools and information

necessary to catch potential violent relationships before they get dangerous.

"These behaviors start at 14, 15 and 16," said Heather DePeal, the education and outreach coordinator for Sexual Assault Services of Northwest New Mexico. "Parents have to learn how to talk about this, how to throw out some scenarios."

The problem,

according to Nelson, is that it isn't always obvious when a teen is involved in a violent relationship.

"What people don't realize is that all young people are at risk," Nelson said. "Which is why, more than any adult in the room, (teens) are the people who keep each other safe. You have to be ready to tell a friend when you think there is a problem."

DePeal was very specific when she began outlining behavior patterns that should raise red flags for parents or peers.

Red-flag behaviors include early dating, sexual pressure and even excessive texting.

"A good way to look at it is that the puppet master, the person controlling the strings is the abusive partner," DePeal said.

Despite teen dating violence being a very real and difficult problem facing both Farmington and the rest of the state, organizers believe the outreach and education effort is having a strong effect.

"Since 2005, New Mexico has reduced its rate from top in the nation to 39th," Nelson said. "The only thing that's changed is the level of outreach going on."

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