

# Students work to improve their community

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LOWELL — From gun violence to homelessness, Career Academy high-school students are tackling some of Lowell's toughest problems. As a full-service community school based in Lowell, Career Academy's students benefit from a wide network of partner agencies that provide them with wrap-around programs year-round.

Each spring, though, it's the students' turn to give back by tapping into their network of partners to create service-learning projects that target a specific social issue.

Inspired by an anti-drug rally in 2015 led by students and Career Academy Principal Megan O'Loughlin, the now-schoolwide Community Impact class teaches students how to understand social issues and take action to improve their community. Through exploration

of demographic data and local conflict, each of the nine advisory classes chooses an issue that matters most to the group, researches it and identifies local partners who are already working to tackle the issue. Then, the students contact these partners and create an original project to address it together.

The Career Academy is in its fourth year of partnership with Middlesex Community College, which provides dual-enrollment credit in Service Learning for completion of the Community Impact course. To date, 65 students have earned college credit for their participation in this course.

This spring, the senior advisory class worked with nonprofit mentoring organization Elevate New England and chose the topic of homelessness in the city. They organized a "Spring Refresh" event for Living Waters Center for Hope, a community center serving individuals experiencing homelessness in downtown Lowell.

On the Career Academy's recent annual "Day of Service," they provided breakfast, free haircuts, dental screenings, grocery gift cards and hygiene kits to Living Waters guests. In addition to the weekly meal provided by Living Waters, students sourced donations from Catie's Closet, Market Basket, St. Vincent DePaul, and MCC college students and faculty. Also, students and instructors from the Lowell Academy Hairstyling Institute and the MCC Dental Hygiene Clinic volunteered their services.

The six Lowell Career Academy students enjoyed being able to make and serve smoothies and distribute the donated items to more than 50 guests.

"I'm grateful for the experience of giving back to my community and seeing smiles on everyone's faces." said Antoinette Oeur, a graduating senior who helped spearhead the event.

Another project involved including community police relations through a student-hosted basketball game with the Lowell Police Department's gang unit and school resource officers.

Yet another group partnered with retired boxer "Irish" Micky Ward and his nephew, Sean Eklund of Fist Fitness in Westford, to host a community "Guns Down, Gloves Up" boxing lesson for younger students to combat the issue of gun violence in Lowell.

Students in a Community Impact advisory section in their second year of a substance-abuse project held a screening and panel Q&A for their public-service announcement on what to do when you find a stray needle. The PSA and subsequent education campaign is in partnership with the Substance Abuse and Prevention Division of the Lowell Health Department and Trinity EMS.

Next fall, students and the Health Department's Andres Gonzalez will visit local middle and high schools to inform younger students on the new protocol.

Other groups tackled the issue of food insecurity and communication of services for immigrants and refugees. Each group took away a positive, project-based learning experience from working with local experts to solve issues they care about.

Lauren Campion, community school program manager at the Career Academy is excited for the future.

“The hope is that students will continue to think critically about how to make their community a better place in their lives beyond high school,” Campion said.

For more information about the Career Academy full-service community school and its partnerships, visit <https://www.lowell.k12.ma.us/careeracademy>.