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NEWS

Bristol teen center is booming



BRISTOL HUB TEEN Center Director Taylor Welch-Plante, left, looks on as ninth-grader Ellora Dupont and 10th-grader Asher Stevers measure out ingredients for baking. The Hub offers a variety of activities for local teens after school, from baking to video games to crafts. Independent photo/Steve James

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By Marin Howell

BRISTOL — It was over two decades years ago that the Bristol Hub Teen Center got up and running in town, offering local youth a safe, supervised space to hang out after school.

The teen center's offerings have evolved and expanded over the years and now include field trips, sponsored gym memberships and opportunities for teens to explore various interests at the Hub.

Today, the Hub is also seeing more and more teens come through its doors.

“We’ve recently had just every month (be) the busiest month yet,” Bristol Hub Director Taylor Welch-Plante told the *Independent*.

The Hub saw 798 visits from 154 teens in October, compared to 649 visits from 135 youths in October 2023. Last month, the teen center recorded 430 visits from 114 teens.

Welch-Plante said the Hub has seen its numbers trending upward since the spring of 2022.

“In general, I think we’re seeing a lot more kids come in for long periods of time,” she said. “A busy day when I first started (in 2019) was 16 kids or less. Today we’re seeing a busy day of 40 or 50 kids.”

2024 is shaping up to be the Hub’s busiest year on record, Welch-Plante said. Though, she noted the teen center’s records only go back to 2015, and the Hub opened in 1999.

“It is already the busiest year, and we haven’t even finished December, but I know way back when the Hub first opened that the numbers were pretty staggering on a regular basis,” she said.

The Hub got its start when the Bristol Recreation Department partnered with the University of Vermont’s Expanding the Caring Community Program to offer more programming for youth in Bristol. Hub Co-Founder Ray Beaver helped bring the idea for the teen center to fruition, and funding from the Expanding the Caring Community Program and a handful of organizations provided support for developing the space.

Welch-Plante said the goal was to create a place for teens to hang out during what can be a high risk period of time after school lets out.

“There’s a lot of data that says 3-6 p.m., so immediately after school but before parents get home, is when the riskiest behaviors happen in teens because they can be unsupervised and just kind of looking for something to do and maybe they do something not great,” she explained. “The Hub was created to be a space for kids to come and socialize and get food and hang out that had some level of supervision without it being incredibly controlled.”



SENIOR TEAGAN OBARSKI plays air hockey at the Bristol Hub Teen Center earlier this week. The Hub, which provides a safe, substance free space for teens to hang out after school, has been seeing more and more local youth come through its doors recently.

Independent photo/Steve James

WHAT'S AT THE HUB

Located on Airport Drive within walking distance of Mount Abraham Union Middle/High School, the Hub offers local youth ages of 12-19 that space. Typically, the Hub is open from 3 to 6 p.m. on weekdays that school is in session and in the summer.

The Hub serves as a third space for local youth — someplace other than school and home where they can relax and socialize with their peers.

The teen center is largely made up of one room split up into “hang out zones” with different types of activities for youth. The Hub offers computers, video games, musical instruments, board games, and a plethora of craft supplies, among other activities for teens.

Food is offered every day, and teens are free to use the Hub's kitchen and baking supplies. The skatepark outside is also available, and the teen center provides helmets, skateboards, scooters and roller skates.

Teens that visit the Hub are asked to adhere to some basic house rules — no hate, no violence and no drugs, and respect yourself, others and the Hub — but otherwise are free to decide how they'd like to spend their time at the teen center.

"It's very trust-based," Welch-Plante said. "We ask them to sign in the first time they come in, and we try to engage with them as much as possible, but we don't make them stay for any amount of time...we don't have any expectations for what they're going to do here other than engage respectfully with the staff and their peers when they're in the space and follow our bare minimum expectations."

Welch-Plante noted that at the Hub, teens can engage with a handful of adults invested in their wellbeing and explore options, from cooking to crafting to making new friends.



BRISTOL HUB TEEN Center Director Taylor Welch-Plante said that

she and other adults at the center trust teens who come there to treat each other

respectfully while they are in the space.

Independent photo/Steve James

EXPANDING OFFERINGS

Over the years the Hub has tried to expand those options, particularly in the area of art activities available for teens. This past summer, the teen center set up a new 3-D printer with support from a Department for Children and Families grant.

Welch-Plante said the Hub has also been working to grow its non-tech options for youth by providing supplies for painting, clay, jewelry making and knitting.

Stickers have also been a popular addition to activities at the Hub. Welch-Plante said the teen center has a sticker bowl, from which teens are allowed to pick up to five stickers a day.

“That’s been a really great equalizer for kids to connect with staff or other peers that maybe they don’t talk to; where you just dump all the stickers out and you sort through and find ones you like,” she said. “Having something to do with your hands where you’re focusing kind of reduces the barriers or anxieties of interacting sometimes, so it’s a really great way to broach new relationships or have conversations with someone that maybe is reticent to do that.”

The Hub’s offerings have evolved in other ways over the years. The teen center has teamed up with Bristol Fitness to offer sponsored monthly memberships, and last winter worked with the Bristol Recreation Club, Jackman’s of Bristol and Williston’s Superstore to install a washer and dryer that’s now available to youth at the Hub.

The Bristol Rec Department’s purchase of a van in the summer of 2023 has also opened the door for the Hub to offer field trips throughout the year. The teen center has organized trips to the Vermont Renaissance Faire, Wilson Castle in Proctor and apple orchards.

The van also helps transport teens involved in the Chill Program, during which the Hub partners with the Chill Foundation to teach kids how to skateboard and snowboard in Bolton (depending on the season).

Welch-Plante said ideally the Hub would like to offer more field trips, such as a bowling or

movie night, but needs to iron out details like staffing and timing first.

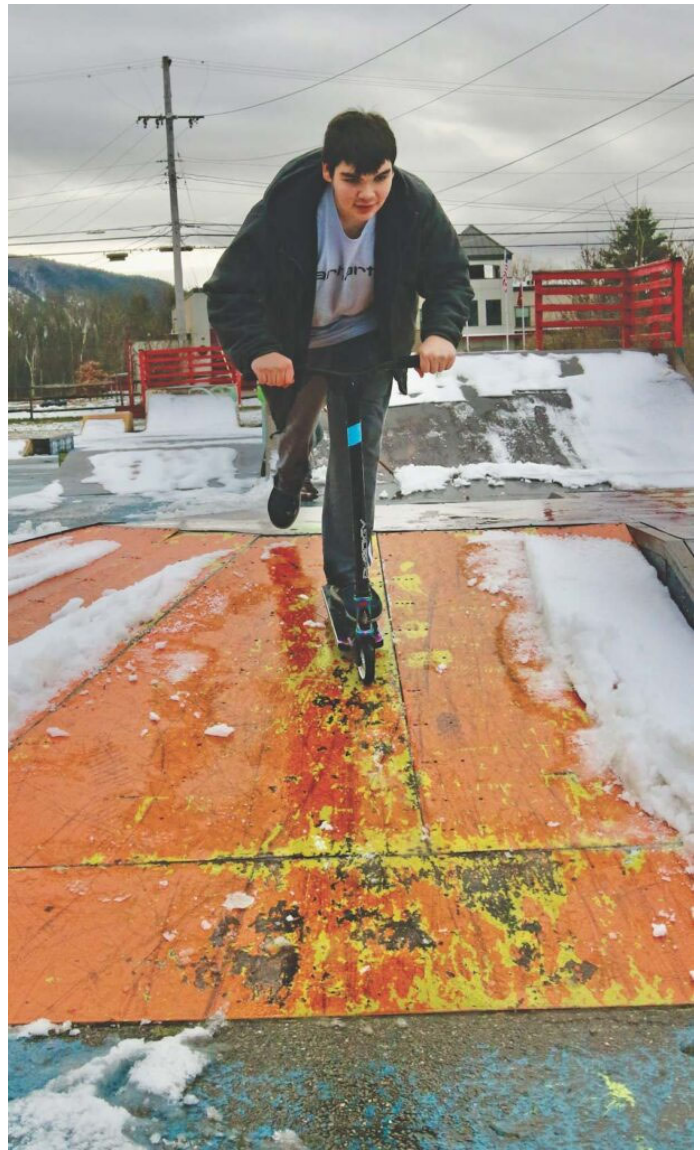
The Hub is working to improve and expand its offerings in other ways as well. Work is underway to remodel the nearby skatepark and make the recreation area more accessible and inclusive for all users.

Plans are to construct a new concrete skatepark to replace the current asphalt park, and the Bristol selectboard recently accepted a proposal from Nor'Easter Skateparks to complete the design portion of the project. Welch-Plante said the hope is to have the new skatepark built in the next couple of years.

HUB OF RESOURCES

Looking ahead, Welch-Plante said she'd also like to see the teen center become a "hub of resources" for local youth. She noted that the Hub currently partners with the Turning Point Center of Addison County, with Youth Outreach Coordinator Tyler Proulx visiting the Hub twice a week.

"His task while being here is just to build relationships with teens so that when conversations come up or it becomes evident that they could utilize his support in a more formal way they already have the established relationship to reduce the potential anxieties or barriers that might come up in doing that," Welch-Plante



NINTH-GRADER BRADEN FAY uses the skatepark at the Bristol Hub Teen Center earlier this week. Efforts are underway to remodel the skatepark and make it more accessible and inclusive for all users, one of a couple ways the Hub is working to improve and expand its offerings for local youth.

Independent photo/Steve James

explained.

She said she'd like to replicate that model with other agencies in the community.

"That is something I would really love to have because we see a lot of kids in all sorts of settings and all sorts of states of being," she said. "Some kids are stopping in just to grab a snack before they go to play practice ... and then we do have some kids that come in and they're in the throes of crisis, and they have been for months sometimes."

Welch-Plante noted that it can be hard for teens to ask for support when they're in those places.

"It's really, really challenging for kids to ask for help and trust that the adults that are showing up when something has gone wrong are really invested in improving their situation," she explained. "When something's gone wrong and a kid needs an adult, it seems like they associate that with a punishment, and they're reticent to trust them and be assured that (the adults are) there to help."

Welch-Plante said she's interested in working with organizations like the Counseling Service of Addison County and Atria Collective to do outreach and establish those trusting relationships before teens hit a point of crisis. She noted that there are some challenges in doing so, as agencies vary in how they bill time and their capacity for outreach; however it's an idea Welch-Plante is continuing to explore.

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