

Government

Community Wellness Forum highlights dangers of social media and addiction

BY DON STEEN
Staff Writer ■ reporter@pscnet

CHRISNEY – The 2025 Spencer County Community Wellness Forum and Annual Dinner filled the halls of the Youth and Community Center Tuesday night, November 18. Vendors representing non-profit organizations across the region were set up to provide information and swag to attendees throughout the evening. The tables quickly filled as the crowd took their seats to enjoy a catered meal from Meyer of Huntingburg along with desserts from Karen's Cookies and Cupcakes.

The keynote speaker of the evening was David Gomez, a School Resource Officer from Idaho and nationally recognized speaker on the topic of online safety, the modern drug scene and other hazards facing the youth of today. Gomez has worked with the Meridian Police Department for 10 years, but also holds roles with the Boise County Sheriff's Office and Idaho City Police.

"Every day I grab a different car and different gun and go arrest the same people," he joked.

Gomez was glad to be speaking in front of a full house for once. He said it was not uncommon for his presentations to have only a handful of people in attendance. Gomez admitted, however, that much of what he had to say might be distressing.

He opened up with the topic of social media, and how prevalent and dangerous it has become. While the internet always had its hazards, the monolithic presence of certain sites has put young children into spaces with potential predators. Indeed, predatory activity can become so common, so fast, that it becomes normal before anyone cottons on.

Gomez related an experience he attempted as an SRO, wherein he made a fake profile of a 13-year-old boy with generic interests. Despite this boy not attending the school, Gomez was quickly "friends" with most of the student body. He didn't even have to explain why no one had ever seen the spectral schoolmate.

"I was kind of sad," said Gomez. "I had a good story to go with my profile."

The fictitious "man on the inside" role did have its advantages. Everything was planned on social media. Incidents of bullying, vandalism and even upcoming fights could be headed off, with Gomez serving as his own informant.

In the end though, Gomez sought to turn the fake profile into a lesson. He told the students that he was

among them, online. Hence his ability to know what they were up to.

"Simple enough", thought the students. They'd just remove him.

Then one student confronted Gomez. It was impossible for them to know who the SRO mole was, because the student in question had 500 friends, and knew practically none of them personally.

A similar experiment, with a fake female 13-year-old student, escalated quickly. Very soon a decorated sniper from the War in Afghanistan was telling Gomez all about his adventures, and was for some reason very interested in the life and times of a 13-year-old in Idaho.

This "war hero" asked for nude photos quickly. Gomez did not oblige, but after conferring with his superiors, he did arrange a date.

The man's evening concluded with him in handcuffs. He was not in the military. He was homeless, and using a library computer to cultivate relationships with minors. Hundreds of middle-school girls had sent inappropriate material to him via social media.

Gomez's fake profile wound up snagging a further 14 predators, including a coach from a nearby school. Another was arrested the day before his wedding.

In most cases, this was not the first time these individuals had groomed children, or gone further. Every arrest opened up a can of worms, unreported crimes across the country were brought to light. Victims had to be interviewed. Families, generally, had no idea anything had happened.

"It was rough," said Gomez.

It's not just the families, either. Victims too often don't recognize something has gone wrong, at least at first.

Social media normalizes behaviors fast. It's an attention economy on platforms of millions upon millions. Practically every kid in school is on them. What can a child do that's interesting enough to stand out? Whatever it takes, unfortunately. Advertisers have known that sex sells since the dawn of civilization. Photos with certain poses or body parts in frame get more views, likes and engagement. It doesn't take long for a sexually charged trend to filter down to the youngest users.

For adolescents, the logical leap to sending nude photos to private individuals is not so vast. After all, they think, it's only for people they intend to be close with anyway.

"Nude photos of kids are



This year's Spencer County Community Wellness Forum and Dinner was quite well attended, filling the Youth and Community Center. Above, attendees listen as Officer David Gomez relates new trends and hazards emerging across online spaces. Below, guests enjoy a hearty meal catered by Meyer.

— Photos by Don Steen

an epidemic," said Gomez. "When they send out their nude photos, it brings danger to everybody."

Even in situations where it's just students sending to other students with mutual consent and no ill intent, things can go wrong fast. Those photos don't delete automatically when a relationship dies. There are a lot of ways that material can get out.

Children, and adults, who send out inappropriate material can be blackmailed for more. Bad actors can quickly accumulate an extensive catalogue of such material, for all manner of schemes.

Gomez said one of the biggest scams currently in play is targeted at boys under the age of 30. Photos of girls their age are sent by a scammer in exchange for the victim's photos. The scammer then threatens to post that freely offered material to the internet, workplaces, schools or loved ones unless a ransom is paid in some way.

It's not hard for a scammer to refresh their material. OnlyFans is pretty well known by now, even among those who can't legally get one of their own. There is an understanding that nude photos have value, either to secure a relationship or just to score some quick cash without thinking too hard about the risks.

Gomez even had a rough conversion rate established based on his experience. Photos of feet are, for reasons known only to buyers, valuable. Not as valuable as other parts, perhaps, but convertible to hard currency. They are also innocuous enough that many are comfortable selling them.



For minors, this often serves as an enticement to establish some way to receive money from people online. Once they've figured a way to do that, there are fewer mental barricades to more explicit requests.

The rewards are too enticing, and without education, there's no knowledge of risk to balance the scales. Those sending photos often don't know that the social media they're using might be giving out personal data, and their location, to those they're communicating with. Blackmail, extortion and trafficking are a handful of the crimes associated with these practices, to say nothing of the possession of such material in and of itself.

The establishment of nude photos as a de facto currency in illicit dealings is not limited to professional scammers. Students too have been known to use them in lieu of

cash to secure vapes, drugs and other illegal goods.

Gomez stressed that vaping is much more dangerous than its reputation suggests. Its nicotine content is deceptively high, within a few percentage points of a fatal dose. Rates of addiction are so high that many students have engineered ways to vape in class, as they can't go a full hour without indulging.

Addiction too, also cycles back to social media. Many platforms encourage increasingly extreme behaviors to attract attention. These need not be sexually charged to easily drift into illegality.

Prank videos of TikTok actors committing dangerous, and often staged, hijinks can inspire young people to accidentally harm themselves or others. These pranks often border on assault, or simply are just that.

In short, social media normalizes behaviors that can quickly escalate out of control. A harmful prank against an unwitting victim can very quickly result in a fight, one the prankster does not anticipate as that's not what happens online.

Social media also gives incentives sexual expression, even among the young. Certain photo and film angles are chosen for this reason, and it just becomes par for the course.

Vaping and drug use also appears frequently online, even if their consequences seldom do. Gomez emphasized that parents need to talk with their children about maintaining privacy, vetting social connections and keeping close tabs on what they put out onto the internet, even "privately".

"That's the only way we're going to stop it," said Gomez. "Discussion."

Grandview Town Council eyes demolition of condemned buildings

BY DON STEEN
Staff Writer ■ reporter@pscnet

The Grandview Town Council met in regular session Monday, November 17. The three condemned buildings on Main Street were one of the main points of discussion, and the council is eying demolition in the near future.

The three structures in question have been barricaded since a partial collapse in one of them in August of last year. As all three are essentially connected, this required they all be condemned in the interest of public safety. This included the closure of the Grandview Post Office, which now redirects mail to the Rockport Post Office.

The issue has been in limbo due to numerous complicating factors. Different

owners account for different buildings. One building cannot be demolished without potentially compromising another. Restoration, already a difficult proposition, would also require a concerted effort.

"We can't tear down one without the other," said Town Manager Sam Rose.

Mustering unanimous consent for either demolition or restoration was further complicated by questions of actual ownership. One building was purchased sight-unseen on tax sale, but the individual who paid the property taxes on it refused to actually take legal ownership upon seeing the structure in person.

With no improvement more than a year later, the council plans to send letters

out to all current legal owners to begin the process of compelling demolition. Rose said one estimate of the cost to demolish all three structures was roughly \$104,000 if the town were take on the task, though he cautioned that this cost could increase if further inspection reveals more complications.

Nevertheless, the waiting game is likely nearing its end. "We have enough to move forward," said Rose.

As to the future of the Grandview Post Office, Rose advised that the United States Postal Service had expressed interest in opening a new office in town. However, there have been no recent updates. Such an investment may be delayed if another community is deemed to have a more pressing need, based

on population.

Grandview Solar Project
While the Indiana Supreme Court has heard arguments on the Grandview Solar Project, board attorney Andrew Foster said a final decision may not be imminent. He also emphasized that questions posed during the arguments may not be indicative of how justices will vote in the end.

"The Supreme Court can take however long they want," he said. "It's a little bit of a guessing game."

Water Tower
Rose also reported the water tower will likely require attention in the near future. This would include draining, sanding, repainting and clearing of sediment buildup. Manganese accumulation is a particular concern. Rose

estimated about three inches of sediment has built up.

"Stuff builds up," he said. Rose is currently seeking quotes to resolve these issues. He noted that despite the expense, these investments would extend the life of the water tower.

In other business
• The council also appointed Jordan Sheets to serve as its representative on the Spencer County Economic Development Authority.

• Rose reported that issues of standing water on Church Street seem to have been resolved as recent rains have not brought about a repeat of the problem.

• Holiday decorations and lights have been installed along Main Street.

• Mowing on public properties has concluded for the

year.

• An updated animal ordinance for the town is being published. Fines will remain the same, but more animal restrictions will be put in place. These new restrictions will include roosters.

• Rose said he is monitoring construction on Grandview Heights to ensure no drainage issues arise.

• The council is seeking community feedback on the recent music festival. Public input will help determine scheduling and other aspects of next year's event.

• Appointed Councilwoman Angie Fischer as the town's representative to the Indiana Region 15 board.

• The next meeting of the Grandview Town Council will be held at 6 p.m. Monday, December 15.