Area students attend advocacy event

Four students from New Bloomfield Junior High School recently attended a two-day Statewide Tobacco-Free Advocacy conference at Westminster College in Fulton to learn about the many facets of tobacco-free advocacy, including writing letters to newspaper editors and making public service announcements for local radio stations. The students, **Nicole Dawson, Ashley Kelley, Paige Ragar** and **Zoe Welschmeyer**, also had time to have fun, socialize, and build connections with peers concerned about tobacco. Four students from South Callaway High School also attended the conference they are: **Natalie Bittle, Alicia Kimminau, Abigail Luebber and Andi Rodriguez.**

After engaging in peer education and teambuilding activities, students also heard from Victor DeNoble, a former Phillip Morris employee who is now a nationally recognized whistle-blower on the tobacco industry. DeNoble spoke to the students about the harmful effects of nicotine addiction.

“We need to treat nicotine addiction the way we treat any other addiction,” he said.

DeNoble also discussed the importance of reaching young audiences with a tobacco-free message. “Eighty percent of all drug addicts become addicted before the age of 21... If you can get just one kid to not use tobacco, you're not only affecting that kid's life, you're affecting the lives of dozens, and dozens, and dozens of other people.”

The more than 60 students who attended the conference will be expected to share what they have learned with their communities. For example, students will plan and stage activities promoting a tobacco-free environment in their schools and hometowns, such as New Bloomfield.

The work done by young leaders, such as Nicole Dawson is timely and important. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 20 percent of all deaths in the United States are caused by tobacco. In Callaway County, 28 percent of adults smoke, according to the 2011 Missouri County Health Rankings.