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Excel By 5 eyeing city signs, plans upcoming events

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By STEVEN NALLEY
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The Oktibbeha County Excel By 5 Coalition discussed future events and plans to increase publicity, including new potential signage at city entrances, at its meeting Wednesday at the Starkville School District's Family Centered Programs office.

Last year, Oktibbeha County received Excel By 5 certification, culminating two and a half years of effort from the coalition to make the county a better place for families to raise young children. Coalition member and Family Centered Programs Director Joan Butler said she still wants to see more awareness of Excel By 5 in the area.

"I know we've done a lot of good work, (but if) you go down the street and ask people what Excel By 5 is, it won't take you very long to find someone who doesn't know," Butler said. "We want everybody to know. There are a lot of people who agree with what we're doing but aren't aware of what we're doing."



County Certification Manager Ellen Goodman said she sent a letter to the Mississippi Department of Transportation about putting signs up at city entrances and other county locales to identify the county as Excel By 5 certified. Coalition member and Starkville Mayor Parker Wiseman said the city is pursuing similar signage for other accolades — including Mississippi Healthiest Hometown, Playful City USA and Starkville High School's 5A state football championship — so the city may be able to help Excel By 5 on that front.

"MDOT (has) a new policy that allows cities to place up to 20 square feet of signage to promote economic and community development at city entrances," Wiseman said. "The previous policy has been a blanket 'No.' We were just informed of the MDOT policy change at the end of 2012." Coalition member and Emerson Family Resource Center Coordinator Elmarie Brooks announced another accolade for the area Wednesday: Mississippi Kids Count has chosen Family Centered Programs for one of three statewide 2013 Kids Count Success Story Awards. Brooks also announced plans for Starkville Bridges Out of Poverty training at the Starkville Sportsplex Feb. 22 from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Other coalition members made tentative plans for 2013 Excel By 5 events, including Kindergarten Here We Come at the Starkville Sportsplex April 6 or 27 and a community health fair July 27. Members also raised the possibility of expanding awareness of Excel By 5 through social media and the Greater Starkville Development Partnership. Finally, the coalition named chairs and co-chairs for most of its subcommittees.

Goodman said these plans are important because Oktibbeha County must continue to hold them to maintain Excel By 5 certification. The coalition will have to send certification checklists to Excel By 5's headquarters in Madison each quarter to retain certification, she said, where they previously had to send them each month to pursue certification.

"Every three years, you go through the original (certification) process," Goodman said. "We have to maintain that (certification) in the meantime. We want to be sure we maintain and continue what we've been doing (for) children ages 0-5 and pregnant moms."

The coalition also discussed the success of recent Excel By 5 events, including its Christmas Extravaganza in December. Brooks said this event brought in 50 families and 73 people in total, and she was grateful to those who made it possible.

"I just thought it went really smooth, and the evaluations showed that it went really smooth," Brooks said. "We had a wonderful group of (five) volunteers from the Mayor's Youth Council, we had two volunteers from the Maroon Volunteer Center, and we had four Excel By 5 volunteers. We had, as usual, our various stations of children decorating cookies. We had a wonderful puppet show the Pilot Club put on."

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The Excel By 5 coalition's next meeting is set for April 10, also at the Family Centered Programs office. The coalition will also send a representative to Grenada Feb. 5 for an Excel By 5 regional site meeting to discuss coalitions' strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

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