When Joe Richardson and Jeff Mozingo, of the Awaken Project, met with Mercy Hospital Lincoln’s substance use committee and fellow community partners they were immediately impressed. “I don’t know what you’re doing here in Lincoln County, but I’ve never seen a community so driven to get involved and support discussion with students and parents about the devastation of heroin and substance use,” Richardson said “Keep doing what you’re doing, and I hope others follow.”

The facts are devastating, and should not be ignored. In the United States, heroin-related overdose deaths have more than quadrupled since 2010, with nearly 13,000 people dying in 2015. Stopping this epidemic starts with educating youth about the dangers of heroin and showing them that denying drugs is the only option.

To help stem the epidemic, Mercy Hospital Lincoln joined area businesses and organizations including Lincoln-Pike Counties Drug Court Foundation and Rise Up Probation and Intervention Services, LLC, to give all middle school students in Lincoln County access to an innovative anti-drug program, “The Awaken Project.” Through a live rock concert and powerful, firsthand stories, students learned about the effects of heroin.

“We’re empowering them to deny drugs completely,” said Joe Richardson and Jeff Mozingo, The Awaken Project program coordinators.

Richardson, a former Boston Red Sox player and St. Louis native, has seen firsthand the ramifications of loved ones using drugs. He and Mozingo travel to schools across the country to warn students and faculty that addiction and death can happen to anyone, even after using heroin only once.