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Colin Powell's America's Promise Alliance: Newport News, Hampton, Surry among the best places for young people in U.S.

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12:01 AM EDT, September 21, 2010

Newport News, Hampton and Surry County are great places for young people, according to an organization founded by former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The America's Promise Alliance says the three Virginia localities are among the "100 Best Communities for Young People." A celebration was planned for Tuesday morning in Washington, D.C.

Newport News and Hampton have won four times in a row, and are among only 31 communities to win every year since the award began four years ago. Surry is being awarded the best designation for the first time. About 350 communities apply every year.

Jordan LaPier, a spokesman for the America's Promise Alliance, said Hampton and Newport News are known for the Youth Career Café and opportunities for youth.

"We're awarding their continued and lasting commitment to youth," LaPier said.

LaPier said the award is based on essays submitted by communities that highlight how each community best exemplifies the "five promises" that are at the heart of America's Promise Alliance. The five promises for youth are caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education and opportunities to help others, according to the alliance.

LaPier said the awards are necessarily subjective because each community has different ways to engage youth. He said it would be impossible to grant the awards based on statistics.

Sharnya Smith, Youth Career Café coordinator, said the program is used on the entire Peninsula, and it provides ways for students in middle and high schools to learn about careers, including interviewing, resume and job hunting skills. The café has also brought in companies to conduct interviews for teen jobs.

"Cities that have strong partnerships with youth programs do well with America's Promise," Smith said.

Kathy Johnson, executive director of Alternatives Inc., which has a Youth Civic Engagement Initiative contract with Hampton, said the city has had a long tradition of "youth empowerment and engagement."

For instance, the Kids Involved in Community Kindness after-school program pairs high school and college students with elementary school students to devise service projects, such as improvements to the basketball courts at Y.H. Thomas Community Center.

LaPier said an emphasis this year is dropout prevention. Both Newport News and Hampton schools have been touting

dropout prevention programs.

"I'm absolutely thrilled. Hampton has a tremendous focus on youth," said Linda Shifflette, Hampton schools superintendent.

Anita Walters, a spokeswoman for Newport News who helped put together the application, said Newport News as well as Hampton appoint young people to serve on civic boards.

"We are actively working with our youth, getting our kids on boards and commissions," Walters said.

One example is the Newport News police chief's advisory council, Walters said. This year, students from all over Newport News created a public service video warning about the dangers of texting while driving.

Sophenia Pierce, who heads up the Surry County Office on Youth, said the county emphasizes a number of youth/adult partnerships, including with the Community Builders Network and the Surry County Youth Council.

"We have a strong commitment," Pierce said. "We're keeping young people engaged."

Best communities for young people

The America's Promise Alliance was founded by former Secretary of State Colin Powell and his wife, Alma. The alliance is a partnership with more than 400 corporations, non-profit organizations and advocacy groups. The Alliance today is celebrating the "100 Best Communities for Young People." Newport News, Hampton and Surry County are being recognized. Newport News and Hampton have won the award four years in a row. Details: <http://www.americaspromise.org>.

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