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Youth Activism: Engaging Teens in the Sexual Violence Prevention Movement

Youth (individuals aged 12-18 years) are impacted greatly by sexual violence. During the most formative years of their lives, teens are bombarded with misogynistic images, myths concerning rape and sexual assault, and begin intimate relationships without knowing how to identify unhealthy or abusive behaviors in dating partners. By working with youth to empower and educate themselves and others, advocates can reach more teens than by presenting prevention curricula alone.

Peer education is an opportunity to use peer influence as a catalyst for action and behavior change – students will share similar perspectives with peer educators, who can gain a certain level of credibility with their audience that can be difficult for adult educators to achieve. Tapping into the wealth of knowledge and experience teens possess can not only enrich outreach programs, but lighten the load for already busy prevention educators.

Valued Partners

Establishing a peer-led education program requires adult understanding of teen culture and a mutual level of respect. Youth deserve to be treated as valued and equal partners in the effort to end sexual violence. Because of the unique perspective the next generation will have on movement strategies and methods, advocates and educators can benefit exponentially from youth insight!

Involving youth can be one of the most groundbreaking activities in which an agency can engage. Not only is this group a new pool for volunteers and support, but involvement can enhance an organization's image within their community by not only providing counseling services, but also becoming an organization offering positive programs for youth. This new image can facilitate outreach to communities and individuals previously unresponsive. There will be more voices educating about sexual violence, changing social norms and engaging in action – enabling agencies to engage in larger systems- and social-based change.

According to the United Way's *Youth As Equal Partners: A Guidebook on Youth Involvement*, there are a number of elements that need to be addressed in order to effectively engage youth:



- ♦ Volunteers or peer educators should not be selected based solely on a record of involvement or popularity – youth should be given and equal opportunity to engage in agency programs
- ♦ Do not tokenize youth within an agency – avoid stereotypes and remember that *one individual does not speak for all young people*



- ♦ Be sure to provide adequate training and orientation to everyone involved in your agency programs and volunteer positions
- ♦ Everyone must be represented and have a respected voice in agency decision-making and direction – this includes board of directors and committee activities
- ♦ Provide youth with both visible and supportive involvement opportunities – individuals can assume leadership positions when they are thoroughly informed and trained
- ♦ Have realistic expectations for volunteers and peer educators – having detailed job descriptions and regular check-ins can cut down on the likelihood of confusion and frustration
- ♦ Transportation – depending on the age of the individual involved, access to transportation may be an issue: chaperones and chauffeurs can be a creative fix (read on for ways to address this!)
- ♦ Make sure meeting places and assignments are accessible – if it is possible, have a tech-savvy volunteer set up a web conference or conference call for meetings
- ♦ Meeting should be interactive and encourage participation
- ♦ Communicate with parents, guardians and schools to ensure youth rights are protected and acknowledged – be sure to have a parent consent form for youth under the age of 18, parents and guardians may be willing and able to provide transportation and support and schools may want to learn more about implementing service-learning programs and collaborations

All of the above elements will take time and patience to implement, but the result is well worth the effort. Once youth leadership and peer education programs are established, it will not take as much work to keep them going – and remember youth are there as partners and collaborators. Assessing agency readiness can be a multi-step process that can also uncover areas for growth and development. Below is a sample assessment of implementing a peer education program:

Objective: Selecting volunteers and youth educators

| Resources | Activites | How will we know this is effective | Short Term Goals | Long Term Goals |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| Prevention Education programs presented in 3 schools in community | Reach out to teachers and administrations about a peer education program | Teachers and administrators will sponsor peer education program | Begin recruiting volunteers through school clubs and organizations | Successful peer education programs and partnership with school for future policy change |
| Teen volunteer program in agency shelter and/or child care program | Discuss peer education opportunity with established volunteers | Established teen volunteers agree to be on planning/ steering committee and recruit additional members | Planning committee establishes a program outline for peer education theatre troupe | Theatre troupe presents education pieces to X number of schools during the academic year |
| Mandatory volunteer training program | Identify topics that may be especially relevant to teens and develop topic areas – make sure youth volunteers can attend mandatory training | Set a Goal: by a certain date, X number of peer educators will be | Volunteer program will become engaging to youth volunteers and training topics may eventually be presented by peer educator | Ongoing training and increased teen involvement and participation |

Keep in mind that during the planning stages issues will arise that appear overwhelming or impossible to tackle – keep moving forward and address issues one-by-one. Remember that the PCAR Training and Technical Assistance Team is always available to provide resources and support: 717-728-9740.

Leadership and Equality

As mentioned above, youth can serve within an agency in a number of different ways: advisory councils, subcommittees and planning groups, as well as members of you board of directors. Involving teens not only benefits the agency, but also provides them with an opportunity to develop leadership skills, professional contacts and a sense of ownership within their community and the anti-violence movement. Mentorship is a key aspect of coalition-building with youth.

Survey board members, leadership and other community stakeholders about youth involvement and educate agency management about the key advantages to having youth involved in agency growth. Requesting a few moments at an upcoming board meeting can be all it takes to have individuals buy-in; five minutes of insightful and practical strategies may produce allies and partners for developing a successful program.

Reaching Out

Get creative! Designing posters, postcards, buttons or stickers that are relevant and youth-friendly can be a great way to raise awareness and interest in your agency. Reach out to curriculum specialists or service-learning project coordinators of your local school district to partner on ways to include your agency in their program. Go to where teens are – festivals, malls, libraries, faith-based organizations and other community events can be an effective way to not only reach the general public, but engage teens as well.

Another effective strategy for reaching youth is social networking. Facebook, Myspace and the TeenPCAR site (www.teenpcar.org) can be forums for announcing events, volunteer opportunities and gather feedback about presentations and programs. Creating a profile on a social networking site does not take long and it's FREE! Creation could also serve as a way to recruit an existing teen volunteer in order to have a dynamic and relevant site.

Spotlight: Rallying Youth Organizers Together (RYOT) Against Rape

PCAR's program designed to engage and empower youth in the movement against sexual violence is an established tool for community organizations looking to involve teens and youth. The goal of the program is to: improve services to teen victims or sexual violence, provide a safe space and positive experience for teen survivors and allies, present education and information, change attitudes and behaviors in youth, train and nurture youth leaders. Using sociodramas as a vehicle for education and empowerment, teens involved in RYOT chapters throughout Pennsylvania help other youth develop problem-solving skills, greater understanding between individuals, and provide examples of different behaviors.

If you are interested in starting a RYOT chapter near you, here are some strategies for assessing community readiness and creating helpful partnerships :

- ♦ Hold an informational meeting with the school's guidance department
- ♦ Attend school board meetings and request some time during the agenda to present your ideas
- ♦ Collaborate with the district and provide an in-service training on youth engagement and RYOT
- ♦ Contact Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) to gain support

For additional information on youth engagement and leadership, contact PCAR's Education & Resource Coordinator at 717-728-9740 ext. 115.

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape. (2008). *The Rallying Youth Organizers Together (RYOT) Against Rape Toolkit*.

⁵ Ibid.