

Learning from Experience:

Success Stories for Working with Girls and Young Women as Advocates for Health

Girls Inc. provided a mini-grant opportunity with funding from a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to local Girl Inc. affiliates to strengthen their capacity to provide HIV/STD and teen pregnancy prevention projects and/or programs for girls and young women with special attention to African American and/or Latina girls and young women. Affiliates could strengthen or expand current educational offerings or other areas of activity that would increase their capacity to help girls more effectively prevent HIV/STD and teen pregnancy. While the end goal of all projects was the same, the steps to reaching this goal were very different for each affiliate. Each affiliate developed a work plan that worked for their individual situations. The following is the fourth in a series of four articles sharing and celebrating affiliate successes and steps to working with girls and young women as advocates for health.

Girls Inc. of Holyoke Peer Health Educators Make a Difference!

According to the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy (2008), Holyoke has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the state of Massachusetts with 115 per 1,000 (11.5%) live births belonging to teens aged 15-19¹. Approximately 86.2% of these teen births are born to Latina mothers² while persons of Latino ethnicity only make up 19.1% of Hampden Counties population³. Chicopee ranks 17th for teen births with 32 per 1,000 (3.2%) live births born to teens (Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, 2008)⁴.



Holyoke's rate of Chlamydia for teens aged 15-19 is over three times the rate for the state of Massachusetts at 3546.1 per 100,000 (MDPH, 2008).⁵ Nearly 3% of those diagnosed with HIV or AIDS in the Western portion of the state of Massachusetts where Holyoke and Chicopee are located are between the ages of 13 and 19 (MDPH, 2008).⁶

Tips for Engaging Girls as Leaders for the Prevention of HIV/AIDS:

- 1. Make sure that teens are sufficiently knowledgeable about HIV, its transmission, and its impact on individuals who are HIV positive.**
- 2. Seek speakers or health educators from the local health department and local HIV/AIDS services organizations to talk with the girls.**
- 3. Partner with the local health department or HIV/AIDS service.**
- 4. Work with girls to develop short talks or presentations on HIV prevention and testing.**
- 5. Support two to three teen volunteers in attending local Community Planning Group meetings.**
- 6. Work with older girls to review and comment on state and local plans for HIV prevention from the perspective of teen girls.**
- 7. Visit local HIV/AIDS service organizations that focus on or include services for teens; seek volunteer opportunities.**
- 8. Engage girls in developing local activities and fundraisers consistent with themes for national HIV/AIDS days or events that are relevant to cultural/ethnic groups of the girls.**

For more information, see: Teen Leaders and Health Partners: Tips for engaging girls as leaders for the prevention of HIV on Affiliate Central

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To combat these alarming statistics, Girls Inc. of Holyoke created the Peer Health Educator (PHE) program which builds on the leadership skills and knowledge of Girls Inc. members who have already completed the teen pregnancy curricula series *Making Proud Choices!* and/or *Will Power/Won't Power*. Through the PHE program, eight young women ages 15-18 developed and led workshops, and in the process, learned how to effectively lead and positively influence others.

Armed with their comprehensive knowledge of risk factors associated with unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and HIV/AIDS, the peer educators were able to reach out to area youth to increase participation and community involvement in prevention awareness. The teens planned the majority of the program content while facilitation was made possible by collaboration with Valley Women's Martial Arts (VWMA). Throughout the program, Girls Inc. staff and the VWMA assisted the peer educators with writing and movement exercises, and in the development of their presentations.

The workshops and presentations reached over 300 peers and community members and took place at various organizational and local events in Holyoke and Chicopee. The high attendance and retention rates as well as the bonds formed between the peer educators and the teen attendees speak to the success of the program.



Two highlights of the program both include the PHE's collaborative work with the University of Massachusetts (UMass). PHEs presented to an audience of about 100 undergraduate students at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Women of Color event, Body Politics. The messages were ones of sisterhood, sexual health awareness, and uniqueness. PHEs were able to again collaborate with UMass through the Student Bridges program at the event "Hip Hop Evolution." The event was held at Peck Middle School in Holyoke, was free to the public, and reached over 250 community members.

The PHEs also had the honor of working with Mayor Elaine Pluta of Holyoke and participated in school committee meetings to discuss teen pregnancy along with possible solutions. On May 5, 2010, peer educators spoke at Mayor Plutta's press conference on the future of teen pregnancy prevention work. Julisa Deleon, a PHE member, was honored with a community-organizing award for her work in collecting petition letters supporting comprehensive sexual health education in the Holyoke Public Schools. The letters were subsequently presented at a school committee meeting.

Resources:

¹ <http://www.massteenpregnancy.org/research/teen-pregnancy-and-birth-rates>

² http://www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/eohhs/healthcare_reform/sec_2953_narrative.pdf

³ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25/25013.html>

⁴ <http://www.massteenpregnancy.org/research/teen-pregnancy-and-birth-rates>

⁵ http://www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/dph/aids/2005_profiles/youth.pdf

⁶ http://www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/dph/cdc/aids/monthly_western.pdf

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