

## Implementing a Peer Education Program

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Peer Education Program  
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In November 2007, the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault (SACASA) launched our Peer Education Program at Desert View and Pueblo High Schools. Thus far, we have 10 Peer Educators trained at Desert View High School and 20 trained at Pueblo High School. The Peer Education program seeks to train youth to educate their peers about the issue of sexual violence. This is beneficial because research suggests that youth give more credibility to their peers than they sometimes do to adults, so the sexual assault education is especially effective when taught by the peers. With guidance from the Arizona Department of Health Service, Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program, we are attempting to reach four layers of the socio-ecological model, including the individual level, the interpersonal level, the organizational level, and the community level. This article will concentrate on the first three levels.

The Peer Education Program begins with SACASA's seven hour, high-school curriculum. The curriculum, regularly facilitated by SACASA prevention educators, aims to educate youth about sexual violence and prevention through seven one-hour sessions. These sessions cover several topics including: 1) the definition of sexual violence; 2) the social conditions that perpetuate sexual violence; 3) strategies on how to prevent sexual assault; 4) resources available to those who have been affected by sexual violence; and 5) how to become active bystanders to prevent sexual assault.

The Peer Educators went through the seven-hour curriculum and simultaneously were trained to facilitate the training to their peers. The Peer Educators were challenged to learn the content of the training, while at the same time develop their own presentation and facilitation skills, through an intensive and interactive day of training. The training, facilitated by SACASA's Prevention team, taught the curriculum to the Peer Educators, while at the same time the Peer Educators worked on reiterating what they had learned. The Peer Educators also worked on their presentation skills at that time.

The motivation behind creating a peer education program is to maximize the impact of the curriculum on the school's population. With a team of well-trained high school students, the ability to reach many of the school's students greatly increases. With students teaching other students, the ability to disseminate information is enhanced in many ways. The impact on the student population of the school is multi-faceted. On the individual level, students are taught prevention concepts directly. With the Peer Educators as instructors, the curriculum reaches a relationship level with peers modeling behavior. Finally, the Desert View program includes an anonymous school-climate survey developed by the Peer Educators that will look at sexual violence on the school campus—which effects the population at the community level. In this instance, the community that we are referring to is Desert View High School.

As we know, youth learn a great part of what they know from their peers, and in some instances give more credibility to their peers than they do to adults. In fact, when Washington State's Office of Crime Victims Advocacy looked at the state's community development projects they found that youth-led efforts are highly effective in prevention programs.<sup>1</sup> With an extremely motivated group of Peer Educators, students can be reached who might not be influenced as deeply by the same information if it were to be presented by adults.

In addition, by training Peer Educators in the presentation of the curriculum, those youth are further empowered to be leaders in the anti-violence movement in their school. We aim to give youth the tools to teach the curriculum not only in the classroom, but to practice the principles of the training throughout their daily lives, with the intention that by teaching the material they will deeply incorporate the principles into all their interactions. This will eventually create anti-violence adult activists as well.

An additional benefit is that the Peer Educators are gaining valuable community organizing skills. Once educated about the prevalence of sexual violence, the Peer Educators found themselves very concerned with this epidemic and became committed to working towards a day when there is no sexual violence. They are learning that by facilitating trainings and by being anti-violence advocates, they can participate in the organization of the anti-violence movement. By learning how to present and disseminate information that they view as important to their peers, they also have the benefit of learning to speak in public and gain experience teaching.

A final objective of the program is to have an effect on the amount of sexual assault and sexual harassment that occurs at the high school—again, working at the community level. Before beginning the Peer Education program at Desert View, we sought sexual assault statistics from the school. The Peer Educators also designed an anonymous student survey to assess school climate regarding sexual violence. It is our hope that when the program is over the incidence of sexual violence that occurs within the school context will decrease. We aim to help the Peer Educators create a school environment where sexual violence is not tolerated.

While the Peer Educator program is a pilot program of the Community Prevention Education and Outreach department of SACASA, we are seeing tremendous value and are looking forward to continuing and improving the program for next academic year.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, D. S., Guy, L., Perry, B., Sniffen, C. K., & Mixson, S. A. (2007). Sexual violence prevention. *The Prevention Researcher*, 14, 15-20.