

Moving Beyond Individual Level Bystander Intervention Strategies: Why & How?

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Carol Hensell, Program Manager for both the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program (SVPEP) and the Sexual Assault Services Provider (SASP) program points out, “the Bystander Effect is not a new concept and there is often ambiguity around intervening in violent situations”.¹ She further explains that understanding norms around behaviors in social contexts, including helping behaviors, contribute to effective sexual violence prevention programming. ***“When people intervene for the good of others, it creates a safer community.”***

Peer Solutions (PSI) is celebrating its 15th anniversary. For 15 years, PSI has worked to end sexual violence before it begins. PSI has spent over ten years working with Carol at ADHS to ensure prevention efforts are effective. From the beginning, PSI has implemented bystander intervention strategies. To maximize social change/primary prevention efforts and with the support from Carol, we have learned why and how to move beyond individual level bystander intervention strategies. Over the years, prevention efforts have shifted away from putting the responsibility to prevent an assault on the person harmed, holding those that harm accountable. In addition, prevention efforts include empowering communities to be part of the solution. Examples of this shift in prevention efforts can be seen from one corner of the country to the other.^{2,3,4} Together we have moved mountains and we are just getting started.

We have all been affected by the economy. The organizations that are still standing are uniting and doing more with less. We know community and societal level strategies create deeper, longer lasting change, so we must continue to shift the emphasis away from individual level prevention efforts. With Carol Hensell’s guidance, this is exactly what PSI is doing with STAND & SERVE (S&S). Aside from weekly club meetings held at several local schools, we have expanded efforts to include weekly community club meetings held at local community centers. The meetings are available for middle school and high school students in Phoenix and Tempe. At the meetings, students are empowered to understand and implement social change strategies within their families, schools and communities. Two years ago, PSI and STAND & SERVE members founded the STAND & SERVE Community Coalition Initiative (SSCCI). The purpose of SSCCI is to develop, implement and evaluate a primary prevention initiative cultivating safety, equality and respect as norms. SSCCI engages all members of the community and emphasizes working together to affect positive social change across all levels of the socio-ecological model.

Peer Solutions has learned it is more effective to use the words victimization, perpetration and “bystander intervention” as verbs rather than nouns. These are the behaviors we are trying to change. That’s where our allies/safe responsible bystanders come in.

¹ Hensell, C. (2009). The Bystander Effect. Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program. Arizona Department of Health Services. Retrieved on February 15, 2011 from http://azrapevention.org/sites/azrapevention.org/files/Bystander_Effect_oct.pdf.

² Hensell, C. (2009). The Bystander Effect. Sexual Violence Prevention and Education Program. Arizona Department of Health Services. Retrieved on February 15, 2011 from http://azrapevention.org/sites/azrapevention.org/files/Bystander_Effect_oct.pdf.

³ National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved on February 15, 2011 from <http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/150/bystander-intervention-resources>

⁴ Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. Retrieved on February 15, 2011 from <http://www.wcsap.org/prevention/PDF/PISCWinter2010.pdf>.

🎗️ **When victimization, perpetration and bystander intervention are used as nouns, they can become labels with stereotypes, shame and blame.** As our friend Karen Wojo, taught us, “*no stereotype is true*” because a stereotype is about a group of people and no two people are the same. This is the same reason why we need to move away from individual level bystander intervention strategies and include those strategies at all levels of the Social Ecological Model. No sexual assault is the same, therefore it is impossible to plan for what to do in each case. There are too many factors to consider. We understand that intervening in an assault that is about to take place or is taking place, may not be safe and can be dangerous; it is too late for primary prevention. Everyday we are all “bystanders”, so as opposed to waiting until we witness a violent situation, we need to encourage everyone to be part of the solution. S&S works to create a world where our communities are empowered to prevent sexual violence before it begins. Communities can take part in designing, implementing, evaluating and sustaining their own strategies by educating community members on safety, equality and respect as norms. These strategies include preventing the underlying conditions of sexual violence: oppression, silence/denial, and violence perceived as normal.

🎗️ **When used as verbs, victimization and perpetration mean the same thing.** Accountability is placed on the person harming. Community level efforts are aimed at learning why individuals harm others as well as, understanding and working to prevent the perceived norms that perpetuate the culture of harm. S&S empowers everyone to SPEAK UP and take a stand against all forms of oppression including all the “isms” and at the same time demonstrating SAFETY, EQUALITY AND RESPECT as norms. We have learned this strategy provides the best guarantee that our participants, when they do witness a potentially dangerous situation, no matter where they are or what it is, and they perceive it to be safe; they will most definitely do something about it! They say no to silence and denial.

🎗️ **When the “Bystander Intervention” concept is used as a verb, we are able to empower everyone to be part of the solution.** S&S does this by cultivating safety, equality and respect as norms to prevent the underlying conditions of sexual violence while fostering empathy, compassion and providing adequate resources to those harmed and harming others. S&S members are working on societal level strategies. For example, in school districts, S&S is updating their peace pledge in student handbooks and is working with restaurant/bars across Phoenix and Tempe to adopt a Respect Policy that includes primary prevention strategies.

STAND & SERVE’s bystander intervention strategy is more effective when members build social change skills within their schools, families and communities, instead of focusing on individual skill building. There are infinite possibilities about what they “should” do if they see and/or hear of an individual planning to sexually assault another. In January of 2011, SSCCI launched THE GUTS TO BE GOOD (G2BG), a primary prevention initiative. *G2BG is about building a world we want to live in. This is a world where all humans are safe and are treated equally and with respect. “G2BG promotes five simple acts of kindness.”* G2BG believes in 5 domains that will prevent sexual violence, and these are:

- 🎗️ The guts to be RESPECTFUL
- 🎗️ The guts to be COURTEOUS
- 🎗️ The guts to SPEAK UP
- 🎗️ The guts to be HONEST
- 🎗️ The guts to LEND A HAND

This is our bystander “intervention”. We believe it takes everyone to end sexual violence. We are all Peers, We are all the Solution. Thank you, Carol Hensell.