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The Youth Sexual Health Project
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Youth Sexual Health Project: A Framework for Change

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the spring of 2009, the Committee on Health launched the Youth Sexual Health Project (Project) with the ultimate goal of developing youth-inspired sexual health programming strategies that can be implemented in the District of Columbia. Working with youth advisors, the Committee investigated sexual health information awareness among District youth and attitudes about current programming through focus groups, key informant interviews, youth surveys, and media assessments. This report, *A Framework for Change*, is the culmination of this effort.

Below is a summary of two of the major components of the report – key findings and lessons learned during the research phase of the Project and the Youth-Inspired Sexual Health Framework.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS

Youth focus group discussion topics ranged from sexual health curricula and condom availability to the use of digital and electronic media as part of sexual health campaigns.

Sexual Health Information

Youth focus groups participants reported accessing sexual health information from a variety of sources, with health education classes being the most common. Generally speaking, youth are disappointed with health education classes as a source of sexual health information and would prefer the use of more non-traditional formats, including peer-led initiatives and interactive workshops.

Condoms

Despite an awareness of the risks associated with unprotected sex, many youth report not using condoms. While some students report accessing the free school-based condom availability program, overall awareness and utilization of the program is limited. In addition, youth have strong opinions about particular condom brands.

Sexual Education Curriculum

Youth understand the importance of learning about reproductive anatomy, but desire more information about self-esteem and healthy relationships. They also find compatibility with educators essential to the success of a sexual health curriculum

and believe that sexual health information is best provided by someone that is relatable, young, and demographically representative of the class.

Sexual Health Workshops

Youth showed a preference for a non-traditional approach to sexual health education. Specifically, workshops were cited as a unique opportunity to disseminate accurate, comprehensive sexual health information that could be particularly beneficial to both youth and parents.

New Media/Electronic Communication

Youth rely heavily on electronic and digital communication tools to converse with friends and family. Text messaging and social networking websites are the most popular modes of communication and may be valuable options to better engage youth in sexual health programs.

Peer-Led Initiatives

Youth reported that peers could make appropriate health educators. Youth are also drawn to youth-led programs that are innovative, convenient, and administered in a safe environment.

School Nurses

Generally speaking, youth do not utilize school nurses as a resource for sexual health knowledge. Youth perceive school nurses as inaccessible, untrustworthy, and judgmental, undermining their potential to disseminate accurate and complete sexual health information.

SCHOOL NURSE FOCUS GROUP

A focus group was conducted with school nurses to gain a better sense of sexual health in schools and program policies.

School Nurses and Sexual Health Programming

Though school nurses are expected to provide health promotion and educational programs on sexually transmitted diseases, there is a lack of clarity as to the role of school nurses with respect to the delivery of general sexual health information. In addition, though training opportunities are available, school nurses do not always receive continuing education on youth sexual health issues.

YOUTH SURVEYS

To better understand the impact of digital and electronic communications on sexual health programming, the Project team surveyed youth on a variety of New Media tools, such as text messaging and social networking websites.

Cell Phones and Text Messaging

The vast majority of youth – 88 percent – reported having a cell phone. Of those, 86 percent reported that they send and receive text messages on a regular basis. Further, 44 percent of youth reported sending or receiving more than 100 text messages a day.

Computer and Internet

An overwhelming majority of survey respondents – 87 percent – reported having access to a computer at home, of which 94 percent reported having access to the Internet. Of the students that reported not having Internet access at home, many indicated that they use the Internet at a friend's or relative's house.

Online Sexual Health Information

Nearly half of District youth – 41 percent – have searched the Internet for sexual health information. Despite this relatively high number, only 5 percent of survey respondents reported receiving a majority of their sexual health information online.

Current Sexual Health Campaigns

Survey respondents recognized logos and materials from a variety of sexual health campaigns. Youth surveyed described BET's "Rap-It-Up" campaign as the most visually appealing and as the most informative with regard to raising their awareness of sexual health issues. Metro TeenAIDS's "RealTalkDC" and BET's "Rap-It-Up" campaigns were considered the most effective at mobilizing students to seek sexual health information and services.

Condom Websites

Nearly all respondents reported not having visited a condom website as a source of online sexual health information. When asked whether they would use the information from the condom websites presented, almost half of surveyed youth indicated that they would use the information from the Trojan website.

Celebrity Spokespersons and Sexual Health Campaigns

Survey respondents indicated that receiving health messages from celebrities would help inform them about sexual health issues. Of those celebrities presented, Common and Ludacris were most often recognized for their involvement in public health campaigns. Survey respondents also noted that celebrities known to have engaged in irresponsible behaviors would

not have credibility with young people when promoting positive sexual health decisions unless the celebrity acknowledged their own mistakes.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key informant interviews were conducted with District health professionals to learn more about youth sexual health planning in the District.

Working with Youth

Many experts cited the need for sexual health programs to work more effectively with youth, including seeing youth as partners in the development and implementation of campaigns.

Socioeconomic Factors

A common theme among key informant interviews is that social and economic factors greatly impact youth sexual health and overall well being. These can include financial stability and access to primary care as well as culture and gender norms.

Developing Innovative Health Programs

Health professionals spoke positively about initiatives that involve employing youth to create and develop sexual health programs for their peers. In addition, many discussed using text messaging and social networking to engage and promote youth health programs.

Improving Sexual Health Education

Experts agreed that school-based programs are the primary source of sexual health education but that they often lack consistency in their administration throughout the school system.

WEBSITE ASSESSMENT

To better understand what sexual health information is available to youth and how it can be accessed, the Project team conducted its own assessment of the most prominent youth sexual health campaigns that utilize New Media technologies.

Strengths

Many sites have interactive features that effectively engage youth, such as text messaging, online quizzes, games, educational videos, and question and response sections. In addition, many hold themselves out as “safe spaces” where youth do not have to fear being judged when asking questions about sexual health.

Weaknesses

Several sites failed to engage youth due to design or content weaknesses. Typically design problems included having a dull color scheme, not being interactive, or not being easy to navigate. Other websites were described as having an outdated or “old school” design that was not appealing to youth.

Youth-Inspired Sexual Health Framework

Based on the aforementioned research findings, the Project team developed a set of five guiding principles that should drive any effort to develop sexual health programming for youth. For each principle, the Project team selected one overarching goal and then created a specific set of objectives and proposed activities that can be implemented to achieve the desired outcome. These goals, objectives, and activities are directly linked to the issues identified by the youth themselves and represent the first comprehensive effort to improve the health and well-being of District youth through youth-inspired sexual health programming.

Guiding Principle: Social Determinants of Health

Goal: Reduce the detrimental impact social determinants can have on youth sexual health.

Objectives:

- *Gain a better understanding of the impact of social determinants on youth sexual health.*
- *Integrate social determinants into sexual health curricula.*
- *Ensure that the District government takes steps to alleviate the potential negative impact of social determinants on youth sexual health behavior.*
- *Ensure that health care professionals and service providers take steps to alleviate the potential negative impact of social determinants on youth sexual health behavior.*

Guiding Principle: Health Literacy

Goal: Improve the sexual health literacy of District youth.

Objectives:

- *Gain a better understanding of the current sexual health literacy of District youth.*
- *Ensure that individuals responsible for educating youth on issues related to sexuality and sexual health have sufficient competence in sexual health issues.*
- *Utilize innovative and non-traditional methods to educate youth about sexual health issues.*
- *Better utilize school nurses to promote sexual health literacy among youth.*
- *Expand sexual health curricula beyond reproductive health and STI awareness.*
- *Ensure parents/guardians have the tools necessary to educate their children on sexual health issues.*

Guiding Principle: Community Engagement

Goal: Engage all community members in the effort to promote positive youth sexual health behaviors.

Objectives:

- *Create opportunities for community involvement on issues surrounding youth sexual health.*
- *Create a standard message that all community members can utilize in promoting positive youth sexual health behaviors.*
- *Work with local businesses and organizations to promote positive youth sexual health behaviors.*

Guiding Principle: Youth Leadership

Goal: Increase youth leadership opportunities related to sexual health programming.

Objectives:

- *Expand youth sexual health peer education programs in the District.*
- *Engage youth in the planning process for sexual health policies and programs.*

Guiding Principle: Coordination of Health Systems

Goal: Promote greater coordination on youth sexual health issues.

Objectives:

- *Establish a shared vision and common goal for the promotion of positive youth sexual health behaviors.*
- *Enhance data and resource sharing among District health care institutions.*