



## Success Story: Congregación León de Judá

*Expanding Reach through Community Partnerships*

*March 2015*

**Congregación León de Judá** is a faith-based organization in Boston, Massachusetts. Congregación León de Judá implements the curriculum Promoting Health Among Teens! Abstinence Only (PHAT-AO) through their [Vale Esperar](#) program. Since 2008, Vale Esperar has been dedicated to reducing the high rates of teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and associated health risks among Hispanic teens in their region. Supported with funding from the [Office of Adolescent Health \(OAH\)](#) as part of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, Vale Esperar reaches more than 750 youth each year, spread across 40 sites covering Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island; the project has had tremendous success in reaching youth and scaling the program.

Vale Esperar works directly with Hispanic middle school students. Middle school is a critical time to begin conversations about sex and personal responsibility. Hispanic communities served by Vale Esperar have high rates of teen pregnancy, at more than twice the national average.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Many of the youth served are children of immigrants and English language learners – a population at high risk of pregnancy.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the challenges faced by the youth served, Vale Esperar has succeeded in making meaningful connections with them through the implementation of PHAT-AO. The program includes eight, one-hour sessions delivered in a group setting. It works to increase knowledge about pregnancy prevention and HIV/STDs, strengthen positive attitudes toward

abstinence, increase skills to negotiate abstinence, and build pride in making a difference in one's own life. PHAT-AO includes role plays, small group activities, videos, and homework assignments completed with a family member. The variety in teaching methods helps keep youth engaged. Jasiel Fernandez, the Vale Esperar Project Director, spoke about youth participants and stated “we have a lot of young people showing such a level of depth. They understand the risk; they understand they need to make responsible decisions and be mindful. They evaluate their choices responsibly.” She continued, “their resilience, many times in spite of facing many difficult circumstances, and the fact that they still have goals and dreams, is inspiring. Their potential is truly great.”

*“They understand the risk; they understand they need to make responsible decisions and be mindful. They evaluate their choices responsibly.” –Jasiel Fernandez, Program Director*

In addition to making meaningful connections, Vale Esperar has shown success in scaling the PHAT-AO program to reach a large number of youth in their target population. Vale Esperar began with only a few partners in each state, but their network continued to grow. How? They used a community-based, grassroots approach to help small organizations build their

capacity and scaled through the faith-based network. Vale Esperar provides training, support, and materials while allowing autonomy for each partner organization. Ms. Fernandez noted, “It’s a very sustainable model because once the organization has trained facilitators to lead the curriculum, they can continue to implement whether we are there or not.” Furthermore, Vale Esperar scaled their program by tapping into the church network; their strong connection with the faith-based community has helped them reach youth in need. Through their network, they can reach large and small churches, as well as youth with parents who may have initially declined sexual health education in school.

Vale Esperar has more than 40 partners. PHAT-AO is implemented in churches, but also in non-sectarian afterschool programs and sports teams. Vale Esperar has learned that when community leaders implement the program, there is a lot of buy-in; local partners feel ownership and ultimately, youth are better served.



Teens participating in an end of the year celebration  
Credit: G. Chavez for Congregación León de Judá

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<sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Department of Public Health. *Massachusetts births 2013*. (2014). Boston, MA: Office of Data Management and Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved January 2, 2015, from <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/research-epi/birth-report-2013.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, R. K. *Teen pregnancy*. (2013). Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Legislative Research. Retrieved January 2, 2015, from <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2013/rpt/pdf/2013-R-0376.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count factbook*. (2010). Providence, RI: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Retrieved January 2, 2015, from <http://www.rikidscount.org/matriarch/documents/RIKCFactbook2010.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Morse, A. (2005). A look at immigrant youth: Prospects and promising practices. National Conference of State Legislature. A Collaborative Project on Children and Family Issues. Washington DC: Children’s Policy Initiative.