



Podcast Transcript Creating and Sustaining Youth Leadership Councils

Youth Leadership Councils are critical for ensuring that programs and strategies for implementation of teen pregnancy prevention programs are relevant and a good fit for the needs of the community. In this podcast series, project implementers and youth talk about strategies for creating and sustaining Youth Leadership Councils.

Kristine Andrews: Okay, let's get started. My name is Kristine Andrews and I am here today with Shirley Pimentel of Family Services up in Merrimack Valley. She's a Youth Development Supervisor there.

Thank you for joining us today, as we hear first-hand how you formalized youth involvement through the use of a Youth Leadership Council. Can you start us off by sharing a brief description of your program?

Shirley Pimentel: Sure, thanks for having me. So, the Massachusetts Expectant and Parenting Teen Initiative supports multidisciplinary teams in the communities of Chelsea, Holyoke, Lawrence, New Bedford, and Springfield, to address the needs of pregnant and parenting teens in schools and community-based organizations.

The program provides pregnant and parenting teens with wraparound services, including age-appropriate medical care, health education, social and emotional support services, as well as family support designed to help address concerns in the teen's home environment.

The goal is to provide a comprehensive support model for pregnant and parenting teens, both male and female, in five cities with disproportionately high teen birthrates, so that one, we increase academic achievement through attainment of individualized academic and career goals.

Two, improve reproductive health outcomes through delaying subsequent pregnancy, and three, enhance family stability through increased connections with support systems, improve self-sufficiency, and healthy parenting.

Kristine Andrews: Okay great, thank you. Can you tell us some of the steps that were involved in creating your Youth Leadership Council and describe how your Youth Leadership Council or YLC, how it functions?

Shirley Pimentel: So, for us creating a peer leadership component was all about giving our youth a platform. We saw youth wanting more responsibility and then at every conference we attended, we heard the buzzwords about peer leadership. So, we just decided to try it.

We wanted for them to feel confident, empowered, and safe enough to know that they had the ability to influence change in their community. It also started with the youth helping to set up logistics for group events. As we attended more conferences and learned new skills on communication and engagement, we taught our youth those same skills.

As they learned those skills, they began taking more responsibilities. Our agency is fortunate enough to have several programs funded by the Department of Public Health. Within those programs there are two that we specifically chose for peer leadership councils, and that was the Sibs Program and the Young Empowered Parent, were the ones that we chose.

The Siblings Program, which for short we call the Sibs Program, is a teen pregnancy prevention program for the siblings of teen parents. This is the first program in which we incorporated the leadership program.

Being a case management model meant that there was no real turnover in youth, like other programs that are solely based on curriculums that run for a specific number of weeks.

The majority of participants joined the program at young ages, between 12 and 13 years old and they're in middle school. So, this meant that those who started at early ages and were completely engaged in the program remained in for several years. So, simply put, they would start at 12 and stay in until 18. As they aged, they were expressing more interest in taking on responsibilities that dealt with the daily programmatic planning.

The youth were also noticing that the staff attended all sorts of meetings throughout the city, in order to create collaborations or plan events for youths. They then wanted to be part of that. So, ultimately the combination of their own interests and the need for youth perspectives led us into creating the Sibs Peer Leaders.

Originally, I was the staff who led the youth council. When we first started, I only had three programs under my supervision and evening work schedule accommodated the youth schedule.

As we grew in the program size and staff, I began delegating the staff responsibility to someone who is only leading one other program. She also helps set the council meeting dates, orders food for meetings, arranges youth transportation through a subcontractor, she researches local youth

conferences, creates permission forms for youth to attend, and the staff lead chaperones all those events.

Most importantly, she facilitates brainstorming discussions with the group to get ideas on new programming or events that we want to provide.

Kristine Andrews: Great, thank you. What resources in your community did you have to leverage to develop your Youth Leadership Council?

Shirley Pimentel: We didn't have to leverage any community resources. We used our own grant funding and our agency owns a building, so they have a space to meet. We also have a contract with a transportation vendor to bring the youth to all the meetings.

Kristine Andrews: Interesting. How do you determine membership on the council?

Shirley Pimentel: The basic criteria for youth to be eligible and becoming peer leader, is that they have to be in high school, care about the community, and want to help make positive changes for themselves and their peers.

We also want them to demonstrate responsibility. For example, we advertise all of our events on Facebook and with flyers. We're trying to teach the kids self-sufficiency and they demonstrate this responsibility when they immediately call their case manager and ask to be signed up for the event.

We also think kids demonstrate responsibility when they're not afraid to speak up for help in tutoring, for example. The prospects usually start the process in the fall. The process involves filling out an application and being interviewed by current peer leaders.

Our peer leaders are trained on how to ask questions, remain unbiased, and probe for more information. They do not need to have prior experience, just a willingness to learn about how to be an effective leader.

Although, they all go through the process of interviewing and an application, we have never turned down an applicant. We believe in giving everyone an equal opportunity.

If a candidate is not strong enough in a certain area, we ask the peer leaders how they can help him or her get better.

Kristine Andrews: And, how long do your members serve on the council?

Shirley Pimentel: So, they generally apply in eighth grade and serve until they graduate in high school.

Kristine Andrews: Okay, and what about the time commitment?

Shirley Pimentel: The council meets biweekly for two hours. The commitment could be anywhere from 10 to 15 hours per month. We take approximately eight leaders at a time. But, they fill in for one another when sports or work conflict comes up.

Kristine Andrews: And what are some of the specific roles and responsibilities of the council?

Shirley Pimentel: The role of the peer leader is to become involved in community events that engage other youth, help facilitate some of the wellness sessions, attend community meetings where youth perspective is needed to plan an event or

take a survey. They disperse health information at health fairs, become involved with entrepreneurial projects that fund youth-led businesses.

So, in the past we've worked with the Deshpande Foundation and United Way's Venture Program. They help with logistics of program meetings - that would be setting up, serving dinner, cleaning up, etc.

There are many roles a peer leader can take. What we really want for them to understand is that these youth programs are for them to take advantage of, and that they do have ownership of them in some way.

The peer leaders are all trained in very specific topics surrounding teen pregnancy prevention, like life skills, adult preparation topics. They're also given the opportunity to attend youth conferences throughout the state where they meet other peer leaders in different communities.

Kristine Andrews: And does, do the peer leaders interact with other steering committees or advisory boards?

Shirley Pimentel: In recent years, the city has really focused on finding out what the youth of the city want, and what they need from community programs, community leaders, and the government itself. In that, there have been several surveys and needs assessments and community mapping events.

Our peer leaders have been participants in these events. We prepared them ahead of time with possible questions stakeholders might have so that when they're actually at the table with them, they feel confident enough to speak up.

It's especially great to see our peer leaders speaking up with city leaders and exhibiting nothing by confidence.

Kristine Andrews: Thinking about local community-level program providers, how can your Youth Leadership Council serve as a resource to them?

Shirley Pimentel: If other providers are thinking about creating a peer leadership program, my youths can provide input on their experiences, successes, obstacles in order to help inspire another program.

Kristine Andrews: Can you share an experience when another organization leveraged your Youth Leadership Council as a resource?

Shirley Pimentel: So, we're part of the Lawrence Coalition on Teen Pregnancy Prevention under the umbrella of the Mayor's Task Force. The coalition was doing a community mapping event and asked about Teen Pregnancy Prevention feelings. Our youth council participated and answered questions about how they feel about sex education in schools.

Kristine Andrews: And, if you had to give some advice to a local community-level program provider, what would you tell them if they were looking to work with a state-level Youth Leadership Council?

Shirley Pimentel: This isn't exactly advice, but one way we are working with the state is through the Department of Public Health, which here we call DPH. So, DPH is creating a state-level council and chose our council to participate. DPH has created a coalition with the Posse Foundation to run specific engagement curricula.

The idea is to get peer leaders to talk about current events, and if youths are interested in one of those topics, they're given opportunities to do something about it.

For example, some youths may want to talk to schools about increasing the number of unisex bathrooms when they learn that their peers are sometimes experiencing gender identity challenges and are faced with a difficult choice with single-gender bathrooms.

They intend to train youths on the curriculum and then convene a statewide group which will then create positive social changes.

Kristine Andrews: I'm sure there's some challenges to ensuring that youths stay involved, that they're authentically engaged, and are participating. What are some of the strategies you've used to overcome those challenges?

Shirley Pimentel: Some of the challenges that come with working with high school age populations are that some of them are starting to get part-time jobs. Some play sports, while others are starting to think about college.

In the case of working with the teen parent population, we have to work around their schedules, with their babies and very young children. The high school age population, the Sibs peer leaders, we simply work around their time. We plan meetings around their schedules, and even though we can't cater to all, we cater to the majority.

As long as the youths are still interested, which they always are, we're flexible. With the teen-parent peer leadership, we hire babysitters. So, teen parents can come with their children and not have to worry.

Kristine Andrews: Great. Last question, if our listeners want to learn more about your Youth Leadership Council and how they can work together with you for their

community-level programs, can you provide your contact information or any other additional resources that could help them?

Shirley Pimentel: Of course. I would love to share our journey in creating our peer leadership for both my Pregnancy Prevention Program, as well as my Young Parent Program.

My email address is the best method to contact me. And that is spimentel@fsmv.org. As far as really helpful resources, I would highly recommend joining the Health Teen Network. Every year some of my staff and I attend their annual conference. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and stayteen.org have been great sites with helpful information.

Within the State of Massachusetts, our own Department of Public Health has been instrumental in providing us with a lot of support. We also work closely with the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy.

Kristine Andrews: Great, thank you so much for your time today and sharing with our audience the ways to formalize youth engagement through the use of a Youth Leadership Council. Thank you for your time today.

Shirley Pimentel: Thank you.

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