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Street Outreach Workers an Important Tool for Preventing Violence

Sen. Kerry to host briefing on findings of UTEC study by Johns Hopkins

Lowell, Mass. – The United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) is the subject of a new paper by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and Policy. The study describes how using street outreach workers (SW) is an effective strategy to reach and engage youth with the goal of preventing violence. SWs are typically members of the community who intervene to prevent conflict and retaliation, and in some programs, also connect individuals with needed services, such as housing and job training.

While cities across the United States use SWs as part of their violence prevention programs, including CeaseFire in Chicago and Safe Streets in Baltimore, this is the first peer-reviewed study on a street outreach program to be published. This is also the first evaluation of this type of program in a smaller community like Lowell. The results are published in the fall 2010 issue of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*.

The study's interviews with UTEC staff and local community groups found five major contributing factors to UTEC's success in the SW program: involvement of youth in hiring SWs; investment in quality training for the SWs; providing SWs with a comprehensive benefits package and team retreats to prevent staff turnover and burnout; establishment of community partnerships; and incorporation of peacemaking into outreach.

"These features should be considered both by communities with existing street outreach worker programs and by communities in the process of establishing one, as they have demonstrated importance for both program success and sustainability," said Shannon Frattaroli, PhD, MPH, assistant professor with the Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and the paper's lead author.

The process of peacemaking, which typically involves engaging gang leaders in conflict mediation, convening peace circles, participating in a peace summit, and organizing a peace council, is a unique feature of UTEC's program. Another integral aspect of the UTEC program, the study found, is its emphasis on providing resources for creating viable alternatives to violence, such as education advancement, skills development, and securing employment.

“As communities around the country continue to struggle with how to address youth violence, it’s important to recognize that young people need resources in addition to strategies that help them to negotiate conflict,” said Keshia Pollack, PhD, MPH, also an assistant professor with the Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and co-author of the paper. “Coupling support with essential services is a key to helping youth make healthy and safe transitions to adulthood.”

Senator John Kerry’s office is planning a November briefing to share the publication’s findings, and especially the strengths of UTEC’s Streetworker model, with a wider audience of congressional staff and federal agency representatives. Representatives from UTEC and the Johns Hopkins research team will present.

“The United Teen Equality Center is an amazing asset for Lowell and our state,” Senator Kerry said. “UTEC has been a force for understanding in Lowell in the decade since the city’s youth came together to stand up to gang violence on their streets. UTEC’s great work continues today. It helps teens realize their potential by providing alternatives to violence and giving them access to jobs skills training and GED programs that unlock new and important opportunities. I’m proud that UTEC is now providing a national model for how to prevent youth gang violence once and for all.”

“This national recognition reinforces what is already common knowledge in Lowell – that UTEC is providing at risk teens with opportunities to positively contribute to their community and build a better future for themselves,” said Congresswoman Niki Tsongas. “UTEC staff, board of directors, and participants should be proud of this accomplishment and are deserving of our thanks for the ten years they have spent reducing violence and enriching lives in Lowell.”

“UTEC is honored to share our best practices around Streetworkers, who are on-the-ground leaders in violence prevention and intervention,” said Gregg Croteau, MSW, UTEC’s Executive Director. “UTEC is committed to disengaged youth in Lowell, and we’re committed to recognizing Streetworkers and other peacemakers as trained professionals in this very specialized field. This study’s publication by Johns Hopkins and the leadership of Senator Kerry in sharing its findings are both meaningful steps in professionalizing street outreach in other communities.”

The research was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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