

Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) Program: The Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient. Sexual violence is a significant public health issue that affects millions of people in the United States. Data show that about 1 in 5 women and 1 in 15 men have experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetime (Basile 2016, 7).

All survivors respond to sexual violence in their own way. While no two survivors have the same response, sexual violence victimization is associated with multiple short- and long-term health consequences, including physical and psychological injury such as clinical depression, anxiety, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder, and isolation. Health consequences may also be chronic, including reoccurring sexual health problems, chronic disease, and other medical conditions such as high cholesterol and increased risk for heart attack. Sexual violence victimization is also associated with increased risk-taking behaviors such as smoking and excessive alcohol use (Basile 2016, 8).

Sexual violence, like any other form of violence, affects a community's wellbeing. Sexual violence can create climates of fear, isolation, anger and disbelief. Additional community effects include: decreased quality of life, diminished productivity and lost jobs in addition to financial costs of physical recovery, mental health issues, and criminal justice.

No person or community has to suffer from the violence of sexual assault. Sexual assault is preventable. Washington's RPE program takes a robust, community-oriented approach to preventing sexual assault.

The RPE program's goals in Washington

- Prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place
- Reduce risk factors linked to sexual violence
- Enhance protective factors linked to sexual violence
- Change behaviors, cultural values and community norms that contribute to sexual violence

RPE models of prevention

Stopping violence before it begins, known as **primary prevention**, is the foundation of the RPE program. The program focuses on addressing the root causes of sexual violence by supporting comprehensive programming that spans multiple levels of the social ecology.

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) is a model of behavior change based on the theory that individuals, relationships, communities, and society all influence each other. The RPE program works across multiple levels of the social ecology to prevent sexual assault in Washington. As part of the SEM, the RPE program focuses on reducing risk factors and on increasing protective factors in a community.

Primary prevention of sexual violence requires change at all levels

Societal

Change social norms to support gender equity and non-acceptance of violence

Community

Partner with groups across sectors to advance prevention efforts
Improve and sustain safe environments and create spaces that strengthen social connections
Influence institutional policies that support strong sanctions against sexual violence perpetration

Relationship

Support parents in developing skills to talk to youth and solve problems
Opportunities to build and maintain positive relationships between young people and with caring adults
Foster safe spaces for peer-to-peer education and mentoring

Individual

Build skills with school and community-based youth to develop leadership skills, identify boundaries and understand interpersonal consent

RPE funds local efforts to prevent sexual violence

About 70 percent of the federal RPE dollars in Washington support seven local programs to implement comprehensive strategies focused on the primary prevention of sexual violence. Current RPE-funded local programs are:

- The Oasis Youth Center (Tacoma)
- Asian Counseling and Referral Service (Seattle)
- Centro Latino (Tacoma)
- Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress (Seattle)
- ARC of Spokane
- YWCA of Clark County
- Rural Resources (Colville)

Local Programming for Rape Prevention in Washington State

In Washington, local programs address culturally specific sexual violence prevention in several ways, including:

- Working with high school athletic coaches to implement the Coaching Boys Into Men curriculum
- Facilitating prevention groups for youth to develop leadership skills and healthy relationships, and to talk about topics logically connected to sexual violence such as rigid gender roles, consent, and respect
- Supporting youth-facilitated mentoring programs for youth to connect with their peers
- Implementing prevention programming for parents and caregivers

Key sexual violence prevention partnerships

DOH partners with the state [Department of Commerce's Office of Crime Victims Advocacy](#) (OCVA) and the [Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs](#) (WCSAP) to implement Washington's RPE program. OCVA oversees contracts with local sexual assault programs to conduct prevention activities within their communities. WCSAP provides technical assistance and training to local programs. The Department of Health provides leadership and oversight and works with [Evaluation Specialists](#) to lead evaluation capacity-building efforts for local programs. Representatives from OCVA, WCSAP and DOH serve on Washington's Prevention Steering Committee.



Sexual Violence is associated with multiple risk and protective factors

Risk factors are contributing factors associated with a higher likelihood of sexual violence perpetration. Risk factors exist across all levels of the social ecology, and are not necessarily direct causes of sexual violence. These risk factors can be changed; RPE-funded local programs identify community specific risk factors and work to reduce them.

Risk factors associated with sexual violence perpetration include both the characteristics of individuals, as well as their physical and social environments. Risk factors interact with one another to increase or decrease the risk of sexual violence over time and within specific contexts. Current evidence indicates that the following are some of the key risk factors for perpetrating sexual violence:

- Early sexual initiation
- a general acceptance of violence in the community
- excessive alcohol use
- hyper-masculinity
- traditional gender-role norms
- social isolation and lack of social support
- weak laws and policies related to sexual violence
- exposure to parental violence

Meanwhile, **protective factors** may lessen the likelihood of sexual violence victimization or perpetration. Protective factors buffer against risk, and span across all levels of the social ecology. While less is known about protective factors, evidence indicates that the following factors are all associated with a lower risk of sexual violence perpetration:

- emotional health
- connectedness
- academic achievement
- greater empathy
- growing up in an environment where adults demonstrated the use of reasoning to resolve family conflict

Washington's evaluation efforts

Washington's RPE program is working to increase evaluation capacity at the local level. Capacity-building activities focus on developing logic models, assessing short-term outputs, identifying barriers and facilitators to program implementation, making data informed adjustments to programming, and measuring programmatic reach. Some local programs have identified outcomes to measure in addition to capacity building requirements.

For more information:

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