

NEBRASKA ENGAGE: Strengthening youth leadership opportunities to prevent sexual and intimate partner violence

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The year 2020 presented a complicated array of challenges and opportunities for the Nebraska Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice movements, and a national election. During the year, the coalition prioritized finding its footing and adapting engagement strategies with consideration of physical distancing restrictions and a rapidly changing cultural landscape. The Nebraska Coalition has continued to widen the scope of its engagement to focus on young people and community members who have historically been marginalized. They are also situating their work on preventing sexual and domestic violence within larger social contexts and social movements to increase community engagement and involvement from younger people. The coalition invites more people into conversation by broadening the scope of subjects and intersections they are willing to explore. This helps folks understand that everyone has a role in preventing sexual and domestic violence. The Nebraska Coalition has brought these values into fruition by building youth advocacy and civic engagement skills through Nebraska Engage and the Young Leaders Coalition.

WHAT IS NEBRASKA ENGAGE?

The coalition no longer only goes to schools to pass out pamphlets, but now also creates opportunities for youth leadership. Nebraska Engage, led by the Nebraska Coalition, supports young people in building skills needed to act on social justice issues that matter most to them. The program draws connections between movements for climate or racial justice and relates them back to sexual and domestic violence prevention. Mike Wilson, the Nebraska Coalition's youth engagement coordinator characterizes Nebraska Engage as about building advocates and allies:

It's about bringing people into the fold and letting them understand you have a place in this movement; you have a place in this country; your voice matters, and we want you to be a part of this movement whether you care about preventing sexual and domestic violence or another social justice issue. We are all going to work together to push toward a better society.



Image provided by the Nebraska Coalition

LEADING NON-PARTISAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Some of the ways Nebraska Engage realizes its goals are through voter registration, encouraging civic participation, and education. Leading up to the 2020 election, the Nebraska Coalition launched the Votes and Voices project and partnered with Civic Nebraska to work on voter engagement. This project

took a two-pronged approach of engaging the coalition's existing member network with webinars about the importance of nonpartisan engagement and holding engagement drives to bring young community members into the fold. Mike shares that in Nebraska, "many young people are registered to vote, but they just don't vote." Part of Votes and Voices' work involved inspiring people to believe that voting matters, discussing how civic participation has an impact on social issues, explaining the importance of allyship, and getting community members on the same page about deadlines and requirements around voting in the 2020 election in the hopes of increasing voter turnout.



Image provided by the Nebraska Coalition

SUPPORTING YOUTH ADVOCACY AND ALLYSHIP

In addition to efforts to increase voter turnout, the Nebraska Coalition created the Young Leaders Coalition, a professional development group for about 20 high school and college students, focused on how to become a better advocate and social justice ally. Bringing young people together twice a month and giving them the space to do engagement and allyship work on their own was central to the success of this program, as it gave young people the tools and confidence to activate around topics important to them. A culminating requirement of this coalition was for participants to work on a project such as a club at their school, community-wide campaign, or other product centered on a social justice issue of

their choosing. Mike explains that the motto for the coalition is “letting leaders lead”; they decide speakers, content, and structure of their projects. The Nebraska Coalition was present for support and guidance when needed but wanted to center the voices and work of the young participants. Some of the participants from the Young Leaders Coalition were then chosen to join the Nebraska Coalition's youth advisory group, Nebraska Engage Board of Directors, which provides input to on the coalition's broader advocacy and violence prevention work.

While 2020 was a difficult year, the coalition was able to adapt and support youth in engaging in voter registration, encouraging civic participation, and building skills to lead on issues they care about. Moving their meetings and trainings into virtual spaces allowed them to invite youth advocates from all over the state in ways that would not have happened only



Image provided by the Nebraska Coalition

with local, in-person meetings. The Nebraska Coalition believes these efforts are important because these efforts allow youth to address inequities that are at the root of sexual and domestic violence, and other issues in the community.

ADVOCATE BIOGRAPHY

Mike Wilson serves as the youth engagement coordinator and communications coordinator with the Nebraska Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence. He has spent the past decade operating in the communications and community organizing space, working for non-profit organizations, government agencies, and political campaigns. Mike holds a B.A. in History and Political Science and an M.A. from the University of Nebraska in integrated media communications.