

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: New Jersey Department of Children and Families-Division on Women

ADVOCATE FEATURED

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In 2019, the New Jersey's Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Division on Women (DOW) began implementing New Jersey's statewide five-year Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) grant. Recognizing that publicly available data alone was insufficient to assess challenges and determine solutions, the DOW initiated a one-year planning period to engage communities across the state, including LGBTQ+ youth and seniors, trans women, girls of color, men of color and people living in neighborhoods with concentrated disinvestment. During this time, the team connected with communities, including ones most affected by sexual violence, to develop community-driven and community-supported prevention strategies. This inclusive process also helped to build important protective factors, such as social connection and positive social norms, while reducing risk factors such as harmful gender norms.



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH KEY POPULATIONS

In order to create lasting change, the DOW knew its approach needed to expand from what it had done in the past, which was working primarily at the individual and relationship levels of the [socioecological model](#). With an interest in diving deeper into community and societal levels of change, the DOW wanted to incorporate community perspectives and to make sure it was engaging diverse voices. The DOW identified specific areas and populations of focus to guide its planning year with specific goals: creating protective environments for LGBTQ+ folks, developing leadership opportunities for girls, and engaging men and boys as allies, with an explicit focus on communities of color and areas with concentrated disadvantages. These areas of focus are directly connected to strategies and approaches listed in CDC's [Stop SV. A Technical Package to Prevent Sexual Violence](#), a resource that compiles best available research.

To begin to build alliances, the DOW team members asked themselves, "How do we introduce ourselves to a community we've never worked with before?" The team decided to partner with agencies, organizations, and people who were already seen as leaders in the community. They knew they needed to build trust and develop an engagement process that would be mutually beneficial for all parties.

The DOW engaged in community conversations in accessible ways. They scheduled conversations across the state and outside of traditional work hours, making sure the conversations were led by community members and held in spaces such as churches and barbershops where groups already gathered, rather than state government buildings. The team purposefully stayed away from terms like "focus group," which can sound like a



Graphic provided by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families

science project. The DOW did not want to make community members feel like the team was coming into their community, just taking information, and telling them what to do, but rather wanted to build partnerships with the community.

INSIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The DOW learned a lot from each of the populations it engaged. Men and boys shared that they wanted to find ways to rewrite their narrative to show that they have compassion and should not be only characterized as perpetrators of violence. Black men wanted communities to not look at them in fear and wanted to take control of their narrative through a docuseries. In dialogue with LGBTQ+ folks, the team learned that youth were looking for places to feel safe and that seniors, many of whom were pioneers in the community, were often forgotten in the creation of current LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces. The community conversations with girls unveiled equity concerns; often leadership opportunities had costs associated with them and were more present in affluent neighborhoods. The girls in the community conversations also expressed how they were empowered by social justice and advocacy work and desired leadership opportunities focused on these.

CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT AMIDST A PANDEMIC

Beyond the planning year, the DOW remains connected with community members through what it calls “monthly gatherings.” At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DOW/RPE team moved to virtual gatherings and asked community members how to make them convenient and inclusive. The team created spaces for residents to share resources and to discuss what was happening in their communities. In addition, RPE COVID Supplemental Funds were allocated towards culturally-specific agencies to help bridge the digital divide and to begin the development of a statewide digital and linguistic access plan. Partnering with other agencies, they have offered trainings in English and Spanish on how to use platforms like Zoom, purchased devices for individuals who needed them, and increased internet access through hotspots and

assistance in internet bill payments. Community members without internet access or devices were also encouraged to invite others in their networks to the community conversations to keep them informed and connected.

The DOW planned, implemented, and adapted its engagement work with a community-centered motto: “nothing about us without us.” This motto is often used among marginalized communities to stress the importance of community leadership in shaping community solutions. Effective engagement work for the DOW means being active and invested in community well-being, inviting new partners to the table to reach new groups, and building trust by meeting community members where they were. For more information, please contact the NJ RPE Team at DCF.NJRPE@dcf.nj.gov.

ADVOCATE BIOGRAPHY

Arianna Cohen is New Jersey's Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) program specialist. She approaches this role with a public health perspective to support funding for the primary prevention of sexual violence. Strongly focusing on how decreasing risk factors and increasing protective factors simultaneously propels her work at the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (NJ DCF), Division on Women (DOW).