

## VIP Community Program Review

The VIP Community Program works with youth and professionals to assess violence prevention needs and to develop and deliver effective violence prevention programming within schools and community locations. Services vary from single session workshops for small groups to intensive interventions within the entire school community. As part of the Community Program, many youth volunteer with VIP. Their contributions include leading violence prevention initiatives in schools and community settings, conference organization, workshop presentations, working with the media about issues of violence, developing multimedia resources (VIP website, videos, newsletters, zines, documentaries, music, etc.), and fundraising.

### Program Successes

One of the major successes within the Community Program was the summer programming that occurred at the Galloway location. The volunteer program worked alongside the AYCES program to create a vegetable and herb garden in the backyard at Galloway. This idea was generated from the program participants and both the youth in the volunteer program and the youth in the AYCES program were excited and motivated to create this. Together, the program purchased all the equipment and items needed to create the garden, worked together over several weeks semi-independently and planted herbs and vegetables that could be enjoyed by the various programs that access the Galloway location.

### Program Changes

Over the past several months the program has gone through a few transitions as the staffing changed and the program did not have a dedicated staff for a few months. This meant that the youth volunteers in the program had the opportunity to take on leadership roles and assume greater responsibilities within the program. Most of the youth in the program had been part of the group for over a year, making their ability to take greater ownership over the program fluid and unproblematic.

Staff from the Toronto Public Library requested to spend some time with the volunteer group to ask about young peoples' perceptions about the library and inquire about their awareness regarding services offered. This lengthy meeting helped identify obstacles that young people described in relation to obtaining a library card, their lack of awareness regarding additional services offered at the library, and allowed one young person to explain that he had not visited the library in over 2 years as he had failed to return a book and was worried about the penalty. The staff from TPL met with this youth individually afterwards and they worked out a plan for him to volunteer at the library for 2 Saturdays as restitution.

The volunteer group was a significant part of the youth steering committee during the evolution of Level 3, they provided insight and feedback in regards to the layout of the physical space, and programs and services that they deemed integral to an effective youth space.

### Client Statistics

The majority of youth engaged in the volunteer program continue to come from neighbouring high schools looking to fulfill the requirement of community hours for graduation. The current volunteers have been in the program for almost one year, and

given the staff change there has not been much outreach for the program but this is a major focus in the coming months. Referrals for the program continue to come in from probation officers identifying young people in need of pre and post charge diversion options. Youth referred from the justice sector have their criminal charges withdrawn if they successfully complete the VIP program. These referrals continue to diversify and enrich the group.

The average age range of youth volunteers is 16-19 years of age. Over the last several months there has been an increase in older young people (18-24 yrs of age) communicating interest in joining the program. Another interesting point to note is that several young people have sent staff emails through the website requesting to join the program following violent incidents they have witnessed in the community and an expressed desire to become part of the solution. This is noteworthy in that it speaks to real experiences of young people and their need to engage in pro-social programming.

### Aggregate Data

The volunteer group has been part of the CIMM evaluation initiative spearheaded by United Way of Toronto. Pre surveys have been administered and some have completed Post surveys. While the evaluation process is still in the initial stages, it is evident that volunteers feel connected to the staff in Level 3, find workshop training to be effective and helpful. Post data is currently being collected and will be reported on at a later date.

### Supporting Information

VIP is based on Youth Engagement. This approach is about empowering youth as valued partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe to be important. VIP staff work with youth to create opportunities for young people to become involved in and contribute to the betterment of the communities they live in.

The general framework of the volunteer program provides education and training around issues that affect young people and contribute to youth violence. We cover topics such as Cyber Bullying, Healthy Relationships, Gender Based Violence, Substance Abuse and Media Literacy for example. Beyond this, the volunteer group is always updated with initiatives in the community, new research, news stories, humanitarian efforts, global activities, etc. Through discussions around these sorts of things, the volunteer group naturally put their efforts into something specific. The youth in the volunteer group make the decisions around what the focus of the group will be on, what they want to work towards, etc. And while the workshops they deliver in the community contain a predetermined skeleton as a format, the youth always tailor them to be personal and often times rework the workshops to be more meaningful for themselves and participants in the audience.

The premise upon which VIP operates is that young people are the experts on issues that pertain to them. While adult allies are crucial to empowering young people, we cannot be the ones to dictate how young people can be helped or step in and do all the helping for them. Young people can take their experiences, both positive and/or hurtful and determine how they want to use their experiences to interact with others and create change for themselves, their peers and their community and school.

### Future Directions

As stated above, the only challenge for the program has been the staffing change. In November 2008, a full time staff was hired who would be dedicated to the volunteer group and has begun to outreach and engage a diverse range of youth to join the volunteer group. Initiatives such as a new Homework Club are being created as well as a mentorship component to complement the School-Based Diversion Program and the ADAPT program.