



[MECKLENBURG COUNTY] **CHANGING NORMS AND PREVENTING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE**

Community Support Services of Mecklenburg County

Melissa Siegel Barrios understands the importance of empowering teenagers and addressing harmful gender norms within her community. As an Information and Education Coordinator for [Mecklenburg County's Community Support Services](#), she coordinates two programs and partners with a third to ensure that the teenagers she works with have the knowledge and resources they need to form positive relationships and recognize unhealthy or abusive behaviors when they occur. Her ultimate goal is to prevent violence among teenagers through comprehensive curricula and community-level interventions that seek to change norms.

Siegel Barrios got involved in violence prevention efforts as a peer educator at North Carolina State University. The experience prompted her to partner with a professor at UNC-Charlotte to create an adult-youth Speakers Bureau called LoveSpeaksOut. She also became chair of the [Love is Respect](#) National Youth Advisory Board. After joining Community Support Services, Siegel Barrios wanted to incorporate her previous work on violence prevention and empowerment into the activities of her current position. This objective became even more imperative as her agency realized they weren't receiving as many calls or requests for counseling services from youth affected by dating violence when compared to national estimates. In order to address this underreporting and lack of prevention curricula, Community Support Services applied for and received a grant through the Office on Violence Against Women. From there, she was able to develop preventive programmatic initiatives in partnership with community stakeholders to empower youth and shift norms.

**[Shared
Risk
Factor]
Harmful
Gender Norms**

**[Program
Type]
Education,
Norms
change,
Policy
change**

**[Program
Setting]
Schools,
Community
Centers**

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The CDC has shown that [harmful norms around masculinity and femininity are risk factors for six forms of violence](#), particularly teen dating violence and youth violence. The programs and initiatives would help to address this risk factor, and in turn, prevent teen dating violence in the county.

The first program, *Start Talking* from the national Love is Respect partnership, is an LGBTQ-inclusive, interactive, discussion-based curriculum that covers topics including healthy relationships, conflict resolution, media literacy, how to help a friend, and dating abuse. Siegel Barrios primarily targets 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students with this curriculum and seeks to build peer-to-peer relationships through a variety of activities. The course takes place over six sessions, with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes. So far, the full curriculum has been implemented by Siegel Barrios in more than 20 health classes and [Communities in Schools](#) groups throughout four high schools and two middle schools in the county. To ensure sustainability, she hopes to eventually train teachers to facilitate the curriculum with the help of student peer leaders. Currently, more than four teachers have begun the training process to implement the curriculum.

The second program, the [Forward Youth Group](#), is a student-led organization of youth who work together to address teen dating violence and spread messages of healthy relationships in Mecklenburg County. The group formed in 2014 and began developing their Social Norms Campaign in 2015. This work involved building relationships with peers and mentors for collecting data on existing norms and developing messaging and media that focuses on challenging those harmful norms surrounding masculinity and femininity. They have now begun to create posters, videos, and social media messaging to spread their message to change gender norms. In addition, the group takes on an active role during Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month (February) by bringing together diverse partners to plan and host events and raise awareness. The youth are in charge of the content and entertainment ideas for the local event, while the adult partners coordinate logistics.

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access to services system. To ensure LGBTQ youth can access these services, Community Support Services and TOY developed and implemented a policy to demonstrate an intolerance of violence in the TOY space and change harmful norms.

Rounding out the robust portfolio of preventive teen dating violence and norms-changing programs in Mecklenburg County is the partnership Community Support Services has fostered with [Time Out Youth \(TOY\)](#) in Charlotte. Through the support of the grant, TOY was able to modify the prevention curriculum from *Start Talking* to guide discussions around healthy relationships for LGBTQ youth. **Siegel Barrios and TOY also worked to make sure the necessary services were in place to support LGBTQ youth and established a referral and**

According to Siegel Barrios, after attending the [North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) Prevention Institute's training, "so many pieces really came together with the logic model and thinking about risk and protective factors and the principles of effective prevention." The next step for these programs is creating a solid evaluation plan to analyze their impact. The curriculum from *Start Talking* includes pre- and post-tests that assess the change in knowledge and attitudes of participants in regards to teen-dating violence and healthy relationships. Results from those tests have been consistently positive, and Siegel Barrios looks forward to seeing continuous positive results. Based on the pre- and post-tests,

distributed in the first semester of implementation, students' knowledge of healthy, unhealthy, and abusive behaviors increased an average of 10% on six of the eight questions.

From the post-test, 80% of youth thought dating abuse was an important issue to address, and that it was important to speak up if they saw an incident of abuse. Finally, 76-80% of the youth felt their future behavior would be impacted as a result of the curriculum. This means they would feel comfortable reaching out for help for themselves or friends, and would be willing to spread messages about healthy relationships within their peer groups. Development of a formal evaluation plan for the Social Norms Campaign is underway.

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Collectively, the programs have raised awareness and teen dating violence is being talked about much more frequently in the local community and media. Siegel Barrios has been featured in the [Charlotte Observer](#) and has been asked to present her work at both state and national conferences and for webinars with a national audience. This well-deserved attention points to the importance and quality of her work.

These programs are unique because they target both individual and community-level risk and protective factors, helping to ensure they are more [comprehensive](#). Furthermore, they encourage the meaningful participation and involvement of impacted youth. Through this process, youth are recognized as true experts and their experience and knowledge give them power and the opportunity for authentic leadership, while developing professional skills and networks. **“Youth involvement is really exciting. Having them take the lead on the Social Norms Campaign is really exciting for us too,” says Siegel Barrios.** “It is possible to do this. Sometimes it feels too big to do, but it’s definitely possible. We have so many ideals when it comes to prevention, and as long as you are striving towards those ideals, then you are doing good work.”

If interested in implementing similar programs within your community, visit the following website for more information: <http://TDVA.CharMeck.org>. Or email CSSCommunications@MecklenburgCountyNC.gov.



Mecklenburg County

Community Support Services

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