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Road to Change:
A Community’s Story on Strengthening Law Enforcement-Community Relations

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Abstract

The Youth Violence Prevention Task Force, YVPT, is a branch of the United Way that strives to reduce and prevent violence among youth in the county. The task force functions using a public health approach that emphasizes prevention, intervention, and suppression. In response to the high violence rates among youth, the task force organized dialogue sessions in the community. During the dialogue process, there was a growing need to create a resource for community partners involved in the process. Consequently, a web page that includes information, updates, and supplemental documents was created to educate partner organizations, the community, and others doing similar work. The project focused on telling the organizing story behind the community dialogues as well as creating a space for future updates on the dialogue process. The primary purpose of creating this project was to be a resource to the YVPT organizing team and their partners. The development of the web page was divided into four phases; research, web page development, gathering documents, and outreach. The project increased participant’s awareness and knowledge of the dialogue process to achieve rich participation. It is recommended to assign someone to update the page as the task force continues with the dialogues.

Keywords: Youth violence, community dialogues, law enforcement-community relations, non-profit storytelling, Everyday Democracy, 21st Century Policing, strengthening relationships, Youth/Police Dialogues,
I. Agency Description

The Youth Violence Prevention Task Force (YVPT) is a program overseen by the United Way, a nonprofit organization. The task force was created in 2012 when the Santa Cruz County Criminal Justice Council decided something needed to be done about youth violence in the county. In collaboration with the United Way, the council assessed needs and assets related to youth violence. As a result, the YVPT was created with the purpose of working towards an equitable, united, and safe county in which youth and their families are engaged in positive settings that help foster a sense of safety and well-being to successfully transition into adulthood (SCCYVPT, 2015).

Functioning on a system level, the YVPT works with youth partner agencies and the community to create systemic change. The YVPT achieves this by working with partner agencies to promote existing youth programs, policy change, and create change using evidence based practices.

The task force work is guided by the initiative’s strategic plan, *Turning the Curve: Youth Violence Prevention Strategic Plan*, created in 2015. The task force functions using a public health approach that emphasizes prevention, intervention, and suppression. The plan is put into action by the two jurisdictions of the initiative, the Watsonville Mayor’s Youth Violence Prevention Initiative and the Santa Cruz/ Live Oak Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, both which are overseen by a countywide steering committee. The strategic plan currently prioritizes three goals, the promotion of positive child and youth development, ensure supported and functioning families, and foster safe and vibrant neighborhoods. In short, the YVPT is a non-
profit organization that uses a holistic approach to systematically support youth and their families for optimal flourishing.

II. Problem Definition

Youth Violence rates are too high in Santa Cruz County. During the planning process community stakeholders, youth and their families were interviewed to assess to what extent they believed youth violence was an issue in Santa Cruz County. 100% of families believed it was an extremely large issue, while 83% of educational stakeholders, 76% of youth, 67% justice and government officials and 61% of community-based organizations believed it was either an extremely large or large issue in the community (SCCYVPT, 2015). “The overall crime rate has declined since 2005. But remains higher than the state” (SCCYVPT, 2015). Evidently, the residents of Santa Cruz County believed that youth violence was a large enough issue in the community to raise concerns. Even though crime rates have decreased in the county, they remain higher than in the state of California. In 2012, the crime rate per 1,000 residents in Santa Cruz County was 36.9 while in California it was 32.3 (SCCYVPT, 2015). Furthermore, the juvenile arrest rate per 1,000 youth (ages 10-17), in Santa Cruz County was 19.5 (SCCYVPT, 2015).

### Contributing Factors

- Weak community-law enforcement relations
- Gang involvement
- Violence at home

### Problem

Youth violence rates are too high in Santa Cruz County

### Consequences

- Injury/death
- Increased costs to community

Contributing Factors

Some of the risk factors include but are not limited to law enforcement-community relations, gang involvement, and violence at home. Law enforcement plays a crucial role in
youth violence, as a lack of positive and trustworthy relationships between the two lead to doubt about the legitimate role of the law, which in turn can lead to an increase in criminal behavior. Discriminatory behavior by law enforcement towards youth leads to strained relations between the two groups. According to SCCYVPT (2015) “Latino youth are overrepresented in detention. 50% of the youth population is Latino, yet they represent 84% of youth in detention”. Additionally, Black youth aged 10-19 represent less than 1% of the population yet over 3.8% are on probation (SCCYVPT, 2015). Locally and nationally both Latino and Black youth are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system.

The second contributing factor to youth violence was family influence. Parental behavior and family environments are strong indicators of violence, as children begin learning at home. According to Mercy J, Butchart A, Farrington D, Cerdá M (2002) corporal punishment, lack of supervision, low levels of cohesion, and large families lead to violence. A study conducted on over 900 children concluded that children aged eight who receive corporal punishment by their parents predicted arrest and a continuing cycle of aggression towards their children and spouse (Mercy J, Butchart A, Farrington D, Cerdá M, 2002). Children who witness their families behaving in aggressive manners tend to mimic that behavior themselves because that’s what they've learned.

Lastly, involvement in gangs was another contributor to youth violence. “There is an estimated 756,000 youth involved in gangs in the U.S. and most gang members join between the ages of 12 and 15” (SCCYVPT, 2015). According, to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Young people join gangs for various reasons, including money, sense of support and belonging, peer status, perceived sense of protection, or to demonstrate an outlaw mentality”
(2017). Youth who feel uncared for, unloved, and unappreciated in their homes turn to gangs to fulfill those needs. Gang involvement then leads to violence due to its criminal nature.

Consequences

Equally important are the consequences of youth violence; effects of youth crime are seen in the individual, through injury or death, and in the community through an increase in medical costs. According to the Centers for Disease Control, “On average, 13 persons between the ages of 10 and 24 are murdered each day in the United States” and in 2015 more than 400,000 youth in the same age range were seen due to violence evoked injuries (2017). Most criminal activities bear physical harm. Having a gun, getting in fights, stealing, drugs, and alcohol have a potential of hurting the child or teen. Not only does youth violence inflict physical harm but it also affects the community by increasing health-related expenses, disrupting social services, and decreasing property values.

When a violent crime occurs in a community, public services in the community like law enforcement and hospitals are used. When this occurs frequently the availability of these services decreases while costs increase. As a result, the community must allocate more funds to this causes which decreases the chances of investing in other areas of enrichment. To put it into context, “Youth homicides and assault-related injuries result in an estimated $18.6 billion in combined medical and work loss costs” (CDC, 2017). As we've seen, the consequences of criminal behavior range from temporary issues like; medical costs, to permanent consequences like death and affect the individual as well as the community. For these reasons, preventative measures are crucial.

III. Project Description and Justification
Road to Change: A Community’s Story on Strengthening Law Enforcement-Community Relations

Justification

Given the current political climate, the need to strengthen relationships between police officers and communities is crucial. In building these relationships with law enforcement and the community, both must come together to close gaps. According to The U.S. Department of Justice, trust between law enforcement and the community is critical as they both rely on each other for effective policing (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.). Everyday Democracy’s guide, Policing, Race and Community Safety: A Guide to Bridging Divides and working together, states that, to have effective policing it is crucial to “... acknowledge, understand, and address the lack of trust between communities and police” (Everyday Democracy, 2016). Locally, the YVPT is committed to building trust between youth and law enforcement by organizing dialogue sessions between youth and police officers.

Project Description

Included in the process of organizing community dialogues, was a storytelling component which was the focus of this project. Titled, Road to change: A community’s story on strengthening law enforcement-community relations, the project focused on telling the story of how the task force organized the community dialogues. The idea was to publish a page within the Youth Violence Prevention Task Force website that essentially showed viewers how the task force organized the community dialogues. The page included a description and purpose of the dialogues along with an update on the status quo. Additionally, photographs, videos or supplemental documents were attached. Lastly, the page featured a calendar with important dates, such as organizing meetings, training days, or dialogue dates.
Justification Continued

The primary purpose of creating this project was to be a resource to the YVPT organizing team and their partners. When discussing the dialogues, partners were often asked where they could go for more information, and at that moment the task force did not have a place to direct them. As a result, the web page provided a place where partners and the organizing team could refer to for updates, training and meeting dates, and supplemental documents. Another reason why the web page was created was to share the task force’s experience with the dialogue to change process. The page now permanently lives on the organization's website where updates are conducted by staff members.

An additional goal, of the web page, was to be a model to other organizations doing similar work. The dialogue to change process is relatively new; thus, information about the process was limited. To create the change produced by the dialogues, the process had to be shared with others. Lastly, the publication of something concrete as the web page added credibility and recognition to the task force and its partners. As the work is shared with the world-wide web, the YVPT accumulates credibility which can potentially lead to future funding.

Project Implementation

The development of the web page was divided into four phases; research, web page development, gathering of materials, and outreach. To effectively share the task force’s story, research on best practices for non-profit storytelling occurred in September. In October, the intern began the development of the web page which included; structuring the page, organizing information, creating a calendar, and adding photographs. To give time for documents or updates, the last edit of the web page was done in November. In October, supplemental materials were gathered from partners at Everyday Democracy. Lastly, as an ongoing process, outreach on
the task force’s Facebook page occurred throughout the development of the web page, with a reminder post when the page was completed in November.

**Challenges**

The main challenge that emerged from this project was deadlines. Since the task force partnered with Everyday Democracy, the scheduling of the organizations and its partners became complex at times. This complexity contributed to delays in receiving documents, updating the pages and scheduling future meetings.

**IV. Project Results**

**Expected Outcome**

The project was expected to increase participant’s awareness and engagement in the dialogue process to achieve rich participation. This was determined through decreased confusion of partners and increased trust in the dialogue process. Partners were better able to understand their unique role in the dialogue process as well as the organizing phase. By creating a practical resource, partners can find the information they needed when they needed it. This allowed them to plan for meetings, training sessions, or to review material. In turn, partners gained the ability to better participate in the dialogue sessions when they occur.

**Assessment Plan**

To measure the effectiveness of the project, feedback was asked from participants through an emailed questionnaire. This email was sent to the organizing team explaining the purpose and importance for feedback, along with a link to the web page. Attached to the email was a Survey Monkey where individuals could provide their feedback in a short questionnaire. Through questions on the survey, the organizing team provided feedback on the web page.
The questionnaire listed questions regarding the web page’s organization; whether it increased their knowledge of the organizing/ dialogue process, appearance, and ease of use and navigation. Furthermore, the survey provided an area for respondents to provide any additional suggestions and or comments. The feedback provided helped YVPT staff members to update the site accordingly and ultimately serving a better function for partners during the dialogue process.

**Findings**

The feedback provided from three individuals in the organizing team shows the web page was semi-successful in reaching its expected outcome of increasing participant’s awareness and engagement in the dialogue process. Respondents included two people from the organizing team and the Community Organizer Director. The first question on the evaluation form pertained to the participant’s perception of the web page’s appearance, to which two said the “purpose” section was visually appealing, and one did not provide a response. When asked how well they understood the dialogue process after visiting the web page, two answered either “Much Better” or “Better”, and one “About the same.” To the question, “Which of the following areas would you have liked to hear more about?”, two of participants said they would like to hear more on the “purpose” section of the page while one said none.

A symbol of engagement appears in the second to last question where one participant answered “yes” and another “possibly”, when asked whether they were interested in managing a communications piece during the dialogue process. Lastly, all three participants rated the web page as either; “very good” or “good” on a Likert scale of “excellent”, “very good”, “good”, “fair” and “poor”. An unexpected finding was that all respondents provided rich comments, which possibly signals active participation and interest in the dialogue process. Increased active
participation and interest solidifies the success of the web page as a tool for increased awareness and knowledge; however, the mixed feedback signals differences in opinion.

Strengths

Collaboration between the intern, mentor and partners was a recurring theme during the development of the web page. The mentor provided feedback and advice throughout the process. Additionally, the intern worked with the agency’s partner, Everyday Democracy, to obtain documents that could be used for the page. Another strength was the use of existing documents related to the dialogue process available to the YVPT team. This made it easier for the intern to access additional information. The final strength relates to the design of the web page, as quoted by one of the respondents, “I like it overall!! It’s simple, short and straight to the point!” The simplicity of the page could have played into the understanding of the dialogue process and the final success of it.

Limitations

One of the main challenges during the process of this project was the lack of direct communication with all partners during times of need. For example, partner’s contact information was not easily accessible to the intern. Prior to emailing anyone, the intern had to ask the mentor for the person’s contact information, which leads to the second limitation: time. Due to the lag time between asking for contact information or feedback from others, timelines were delayed. To avoid longer time delays, friendly reminder emails that stated the purpose or importance of said request were sent after 2-3 days of no response. Another challenge was the subjectivity that arises when developing aesthetics on the page. Since the intern worked closely with the mentor, difference of opinions regarding images or information to include would arise.
Difference of opinions were addressed with communication that explained the importance of a certain element.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Youth Violence Prevention Task Force now has a permanent home where they can store information and share their experience implementing the Community-Law Enforcement Dialogue process. The web page should be updated to include new information and timelines that arise throughout the process. When the dialogues end, the information on the site should illustrate the complete process as well as next steps. One step that can be taken to improve future impact on youth violence includes, simplifying the language on the page. Considering the importance of community involvement, modifying the language leads to deeper understanding and ultimately more community engagement. Additionally, providing some of the documents in Spanish, one of the dominant languages in Santa Cruz County, could be another opportunity to engage the community. As aesthetics are concerned, removing wordy graphics in exchange for YVPT images of the dialogues can give the page a more personal feel. Lastly, the page can be made more interactive. For example, adding announcements and asking for specific participation from partners, community members, and others.

VI. Personal Reflection

Personal/Professional growth

There are many lessons learned from the creation of this project. The first is concerning the universal perspective on problems; in general, the view of problems is that it's not an issue, and there’s no need to manage it until it is out of control. However, when explored further, rates that aren’t high by general standards reveal overrepresentation of race or other systemic inequities. For example, on the surface, youth violence rates in Santa Cruz County didn’t seem
high, but when examined more carefully, it was revealed that youth of color were overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. Considering the total population of minorities, it is discovered that rates are steep. In short, data should be scrutinized prior to making any conclusions.

An important lesson learned from the development of this project was the importance of detail. When communicating a message everything from words to images says something. A cover image on a website can say, “we work with the community” or “we are a professional agency”. Thus, thought needs to be given to everything being published in the world-wide web. Staying on top of deadlines was also crucial when developing this project. Being on timeline requires some level of assertiveness, another important lesson learned during the development of this project.

Ultimately, this project provided a platform where the Youth Violence Prevention Task Force can share their story, raise awareness, engage the community and partners, and receive credibility for their work in the dialogue to change process. Now the YVPT can direct partners who are in search of more information to the web page. Furthermore, the community can see what the agency is working on, and other agencies doing similar work can have a model. Perhaps, the agency may receive future funding with the credibility gained from the web page.

Broader Social Significance

Historically and currently, there has been talk about the systemic injustices regarding minority cultures. Police brutality and overrepresentation of minorities in the juvenile justice system has created distrust between the public and law enforcement. The web page communicated the importance of rebuilding the trust between the public and law enforcement
with the use of the dialogue to change process. By informing, educating, and engaging the public with this transformative method, relationships can begin to regain trust.

Another way to combat systemic injustice, inequity and police brutality is to improve police training techniques and hiring practices. Law enforcement needs to be trained in ways that are trauma-informed, sensitive to cultural differences, and in less invasive arrest or detention methods. When hiring police officers, departments need to be more sensitive to belief systems around race, which can be done by examining the person’s history. In short, law enforcement needs to exercise holistic practices to rebuild trust and fight racial inequities in the juvenile justice system.

Some pieces of advice for the next intern at the YVPT are offered here. Communication needs to be put as a top priority as it is a foundation for success. Verbal and written communication both need to be exercised. This may mean writing emails, making phone calls, sending reminders and being assertive when needed. Given the uncertain nature of non-profit work, the intern needs to accept and embrace change. Lastly, taking ownership of one’s position and work is crucial.
References


Appendix A

Sample Questionnaire

Youth Violence Prevention Task Force: Community-Law Enforcement Dialogues
Project Webpage Feedback Form

1. Which part(s) of the page did you find visually appealing?
   - Introduction
   - Pilot
   - Purpose
   - None
   - All

2. Considering you’ve been trained, how well do you understand the dialogue process after visiting our webpage?
   - Much better
   - Better
   - About the same
   - Worse
   - Much worse

3. Which of the following areas would you have liked to hear more about?
   - Introduction
   - Pilots
   - Purpose
   - All
   - None

4. Are you interested in managing the communications piece during the dialogue process?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don’t know
   - Possibly

5. Overall, how would you rate the webpage?
   - Excellent
   - Very good
6. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

7. Please write any specific feedback in the table below using the increase, decrease, retain format. This will help provide specificity in making necessary updates and changes to enhance the webpage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCREASE</th>
<th>DECREASE</th>
<th>RETAIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for taking this survey!