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>> Welcome to stories of transformation. An NRCDV Radio podcast production. You're listening to our Delta Focus Story Series. An initiative of the Prevent IPV Project.

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>> I am Yvonne Ortiz, Training Institute Manager at the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. This series features lessons learned from CDCs Delta Focus grantees who work to prevent intimate partner violence by implementing strategies to change the environments and conditions in which people live, work, and play. In today's episodes, our guest host, Casey Keene Director of Programs and Prevention at the NRCDV talks with Megan Crouch, Director of the Violence Free Coalition in Lebanon, Ohio. Krista Niemczyk, Public Policy Manager for the California Partnership To End Domestic Violence. And Melodie Kruspodin of Peace Over Violence in Los Angeles about their experiences with engaging youth in intimate partner prevention.

First, we'll hear from Megan Crouch, who is the Director of the Violence Free Coalition which is a prevention unit of the abuse and rape crisis shelter of Warren County. Megan has been in the prevention field for 13 years. In addition to other programs, she was the local project coordinator for the Delta Focus Grant in Ohio, and now the Delta Impact Grant from CDC which has allowed her the opportunity to be the adult facilitator for the Teen Alliance Council.

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>> Megan, welcome to NRCDV Radio's Delta Focus Story Series. We are so happy to have you with us today to share some of your experiences with engaging youth in intimate partner violence prevention in your community. Specifically, we'd like to learn more about your work with the Teen Alliance Council which engages youth in knowledge and leadership building activities to become prevention ambassadors within their own spheres of influence.

So, Megan, I'd like to begin by just asking if you could tell me a little bit about the history of the Teen Alliance Council and how it's sort of evolved over time?

>> Absolutely. We began our Teen Alliance Council back in 2013. And at the time we were very excited because we had nine students from three of our eight school districts here in

Warren County. It was brought up many times in our Adult Coalition meetings that we were planning programming or for youth, but we did not have a youth voice in that, in that planning process. And we sided to take that on as one of our up and coming missions for our agency. In 2015, we expanded our mission of teen dating violence, sexual assault prevention to include the substance abuse arena.

>> Okay.

>> We partnered with our local coalition in 2015. And we're very excited that in 2019 we're up to 27 students and have seven of our eight local school districts represented.

>> Wow. That's amazing. You know, congratulations on that. And it's great to see that auto you have had this longevity with the project is it really speaks to its sustainability. So can you tell me, Megan, what -- along the way, what has surprised, kind of, about how the Teen Alliance Council has evolved or, you know, related to your project? What have the surprises been?

>> I think the first big surprise for us was that it wasn't necessarily going to go as planned. We have evolved and shifted and changed things pretty much every year. I know as adults we tend to like things to be the same, and we think that our programming should be pretty consistent, and the youth like to shake things up every year. And we have to be flexible and go with it. It's okay to fail, and one of the things struggles with, but I've gotten better at use that failure, or what I thought was a failure to process with the kids to get them to recognize that no, sir everything is going to work out the first time that you try it. What did we do good? What could we do better? That was, I think, probably one of the first surprises for me as an adult facilitator was how often this was going to evolve.

>> Yeah.

>> And I think the second biggest for me was we thought about the youth at the time we were working with them and how they were going to go educate themselves, and how they were going to then spread that message amongst their peers, but what we didn't think about was how they were going to grow up into adults and use that knowledge in their professional careers.

And since we've been doing this so long, since 2013, we are now watching this, our first group of TAC students as adults. We have one student who I was for reference into the police academy, and she is now a certificate State of Ohio Police Officer, and she's doing amazing work as a first-year female police officer. And I think of the impact of her responding to a domestic violence call, and how she will handle things differently than someone who hasn't gone through our program.

We have an RA up in Michigan State whose dorm just won the most inclusive and supportive dorm on campus and that was [inaudible] of her work. So it's just really neat to see how we've impacted these youth during high school, but then how they are becoming the new leaders in some of the work that we're doing.

>> Yeah. No, that's really amazing, and you're right. A lot of times we, you know, think about youth engagement work as, you know, what's happening with youth currently and not thinking about, sort of, the ripple effect or the impact that it's going to have for these youth as they grow and develop their whole lives long, and what an investment it is, you know, a project like this in, you know, just in the future of our movement and in the future of our work together. That's amazing. So --

>> And the connection we still have with these youth.

>> Yeah.

>> I still get emails; I get text messages we're on social media. They still email me or advice, so I think that is also really a bonus. That connection to a caring adult that has continued as they've grown.

>> Yeah. Okay. Great. And how sort of, you know, is a factor in promoting resilience and how that is, you know, growing a community, growing a healthy community.

>> Absolutely.

>> That's very good. Thank you. That's very good. I love it.

>> So what about then -- and this may be tied to -- this may be connected to, kind of, what you just talked about, but what about your -- what about the Teen Alliance Council makes you feel the most proud?

>> I think probably the biggest thing for me is that the youth have a voice in our country and that it's not just a token voice. They're not just being asked, you know, what font do you like on this poster, or, you know, what do you -- what type of pizza should we serve at the youth summit. They're actually really being valued in the community for their opinions, for their voice of what's working and what should we as programs be doing in our communities to make it better for youth.

They're actually getting to share the information. We had a retreat for the Substance Abuse Coalition, and we invited our TAC students to come and to share what they thought was the issues around substance abuse in our community. And they sat at the table right along with adults from the mental health field, with the suicide prevention field, and all these different areas. And they had a voice. So it was pretty neat to see.

>> That's awesome. I mean, that's really building -- that's -- your intention there and what's happening and the impact I'm hearing from you is you're building an intergenerational movement. Which is I think, you know, something we strive for, something we want, something we see the richness in and the value in. And that's sort of what you're building in your community there.

>> Absolutely. And it's neat to see where they are the same and where they are different too. That's been an interesting thing for me to view as I'm working with both sides of the adult part of our coalition and the youth part.

>> Okay. So meaning, yeah, the youth voice is not a single voice, right. There is --

>> Yeah.

>> There is great diversity in youth voice the same way there is great diversity in adult voices. And so having youth representation means more than just having one voice at the table. Interesting. That's cool. So -- okay. So let's talk about, kind of, what key resources, or tools, or partnerships have really been critical or really instrumental in the success of the Teen Alliance council.

>> I think where our group -- I think we were doing well on our own as a coalition, but I think in 2015 when we broadened our subject to include substance abuse, became partners with Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition, when we started seeking additional funding from our mental health board, I think that's really where our program took off because it -- we were all seeking the same youth. And it's really hard, as most people who were working with youth know, to get them involved and engaged. And so anything we can do to make that easier on them and by having so many topics covered by this one coalition, by our Youth Coalition, I think that was essential. We have so many resources now. So if we need something that our grant doesn't cover, we can put it out to both of our coalitions and usually within a day, we have a response and somebody is willing to help.

And our adults are vested in it. We have a youth summit once a year, and we have 60 to 100 kids come to this one-day event. And we will have 20 to 30 adults there giving their day as well. So I think, I think that partnership with other coalitions in our community has really helped keep us growing and keep us moving in the direction that we want to go into because there is a lot of things that these kids want to say and just giving them a voice in all those topics, I think, has been very helpful.

>> Yeah. I love what you're saying in terms of, kind of, integrating, you know, these different issues that impact youth and that you care about, and that they want to have a voice. Because, you though, as we've learned from connecting the dots, right, all different kinds of violence are -- their interconnected, and so are the risk factors, and so are the protective factors, and that we've so traditionally had this siloed approach to addressing the various different issues that impact youth.

So what I'm hearing is that, you know, you've really taken this integrated approach and by bringing in partners and by bringing in related topics, you know, all in the same space that it's making a difference, and that, you know, youth are able to, kind of, impact change along, just like a variety of subjects and key issues that are relevant to them.

>> We have absolutely. Connecting the dots is -- hanging right next to my desk it is my favorite document that I've ever had come down from CDC. It's just so impactful, and it really, it gives us the ability to reach out to partners we wouldn't have normally reached out to and secretary and show them that by working on this issue, we're also helping to affect your issue. And so we don't need to be in our offices just working on one individual topic. We can work together. And it's actually influenced us as adults. Warren County has started a collect impact movement and group. So we are actually, kind of, taking the lead -- take it from the youth and moving in that direction as adults ourselves, so.

>> That's awesome. I love that collective impact that you're making there in your community. Thank you so much, Megan. I so appreciate you spending this time with me and, you know, sharing with all of us you're experience doing this work and is there anything else that you would like to share before we end?

>> We just -- I think the last thing I kind of want to share is that: It's really making a difference in the lives of these teens. And it's also helping them in college. So we kind of use the lure of it looks good on a college resume, but it a really paid off this year. We had three teens from our council get full rides to their college, and they were specifically told that the Teen Alliance Council work that they did set them apart. So it's definitely helping them personally and in their future goals. So we're very proud of that.

>> That's amazing. Thank you so much. The work that you're doing is clearly making an impact, and I'm so grateful that you're sharing this today with us, Megan. Thank you so much for being with us.

>> Thank you for having me.

>> Thank you.

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>> Next, we'll hear from Melodie Kruspodin, Prevention and Policy Director for Peace Over Violence in Los Angeles. Under her leadership the prevention division has continued its long legacy of empowering youth to harness their innate leadership skills mobilizing community members for violence prevention, partnering with education institutions to support students and families, and engaging men and boys in the movement to end [indiscernible] violence. She is joined by Krista Niemczyk, Public Policy Manager for the California Partnership to End

Domestic violence. Krista works to ensure that the voices of domestic violence program survivors in communities are heard and reflects in state and federal policy decisions.

A key policy priority for The California Partnership is to advance strategies to prevent domestic violence before it occurs. As just one component of the strategy, Krista oversees the partnership's CDC funded prevention Delta Project.

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>> Hello and welcome to Melodie and Krista. Thank you so much for joining us today to talk about your work with the Youth Over Violence Leadership Institute and Internship program to educate and empower youth to engage in violence prevention work in California.

So first, Melodie, can you start us off by giving us a little background about the Youth Over Violence initiative?

>> Yeah. So the Youth Over Violence Initiative is a yearlong program that we host here at Peace Over Violence that starts with a five-week summer program that takes place during the months of June and July. Which we bring 30 teenagers from around Los Angeles to be part of this five-week program where they learn the ins and outs of violence prevention when it comes to domestic violence and sexual violence.

They learn about community mobilizing. They learn about how to be peer advocates, and then they work on their own internship projects to take the information that they've learned and really apply it into something tangible that they can bring into their communities. And at end of the summer, once they go back to school, they spend that following school year, again, putting their skills into practice by creating community engagement and education events on their respective school campuses.

>> Wow. That's -- it sounds so far-reaching, and you know, just the impact can, I think, be so powerful with that many students involved year after year. How many years have you been engaging youth in that project?

>> So we're actually in the middle of our ninth year hosting this institute.

>> Oh, wow. Okay. And you're right in the thick it at the moment, aren't you? In the middle of July, now.

>> We are. Yeah. The youth actually just started this morning on their internship projects. So they've been divided into three different groups. One group is going to be working on community mobilizing. One group is working on creative writing and performance. And the third group is working on digital and social media. So those are kind of the overall themes, and then they get to create what their project is out of those themes.

>> Okay. Wonderful. So, Krista, do you have anything to add about, kind of, the history or the work of the initiative from your perspective at the coalition?

>> Yeah. I think that just the one thing that I'll add is: It's been really inspiring and really fun to see how the institute changes every year. Because it's a new set of youth coming into the project each year the particular issues and items they choose to work on always change always varies, and it's really powerful to see what the youth identifies as the pressing needs and where they want to put their time and energy. So I always love about this time of year getting to chat with Melodie and hear what they're up to and what the youth have identified for this particular cohort, so.

>> Yeah. That's great. No, it sounds to me like it's very youth-driven, right. That's -- the goal is really of the project. So Melodie, when you think about, kind of, the resources and tools and partnership that's were really critical to this -- the ongoing success of this project, what comes to mind for you?

>> I think that the way that our project through Delta Focused was created and formatted really with integral to the success of the program. So working with Krista and the partnership and getting their guidance of having, kind of, a state-wide view of these issues was incredibly helpful. We also partnered with another organization in a more -- a very rural part of California that, kind of, gave us a different perspective to consider how to really engage youth. Because we're located in downtown Los Angeles and so in a lot of ways it's different from some of those rural communities, but I think having those partners was extremely helpful just to get us to think out of the box and consider some of the tools that they use.

And we were also partnered with an empowerment evaluator. So someone who really worked with us on evaluating the program. Understanding, you know, what is it that we're doing? What's successful, and not successful? And how do we take that data that we collected to really improve upon the institute and make it even stronger the following year?

>> Yeah. No, we've been talking a lot through these podcasts and listening to the Delta Focus stories and just hearing that as a repeated theme. Just how important it is to bring evaluation strategies in from the very beginning, and how important it is to be responsive, adaptable, and change, as you go, based on what you're learning. Is there anything that stands out for you in terms of like learnings along the way that have impacted the way you do your work?

>> Yeah. I think one thing that was really influential to me and my team was understanding that there are ways to measure prevention. You know, it's something is that kept coming up as a question. Like, well, how do you know whether or not you're preventing young people from experiencing or perpetrating violence? And there were a lot of tools to do that. And I think, really creatively we worked as a partnership to create those tools and really explored, you know, like, what are risk and protective factors that we're addressing true the institute?

And so if we know that a young person's feeling connected to their community, or a young person feeling confident in their public speaking skills, our protective factors, you know, kind of inoculating from violence, then that's something we really need to focus on bringing out in them during the institute. And we wouldn't have learned those things, we wouldn't have been able to create those tools had it not been for this partnership.

>> Yeah. Excellent. So, Krista, from your perspective, and especially as Melodie named you as a key partnership, you know, what are you thinking, and what do you want to add in terms of how those partnerships have really enhanced the project?

>> Yeah. I think in terms of partnership, the whole Delta Focused Project was really about learning and developing new strategies together. So a lot of what the team -- partnership -- so it's even in our name as an organization, but a lot of what we did as the state-wide coalition was really just try to [indiscernible] make space for Melodie's organization, for the other more rural programs to come together. So we would use conference calls, and videos calls, and also try to come together in person. Which in a state as big as California, I think the closest any of us were was a five-hour drive from one another or an hour and a half plane ride from Los Angeles to Sacramento where we're based.

So we did what we could to try to carve out in-person time that was a little less structured and really just made space for conversation. And I think that's where we continued to see the best learnings. Gave us space to bring in outside resources when there were particular questions, but, you know, I think sometimes nothing beats the power of being able to get together in a room and just talk through and try to work through challenging complex

issues.

One other thing that I would add on the evaluation that I really appreciated was the ways that Process Evaluation tried to look at even what the experience was for the youth going through the summer institute for example. And how to move beyond simply measuring what knowledge they were gaining. Which is, of course, important. But even looking at how connected they were to one another and what those social connections were between the youth in the room. How they were growing in cohesion and sort of bonding as a cohort that moved through the project. And, you know, looking at some of those other dynamics, which aren't necessarily what first comes to mind when you're thinking about a learning project, but I think that spoke so much to the long-term success and connectedness and was in and of itself addressing some risk and protective factor in the evaluation.

>> Yeah, yeah. Wonderful. And I think you spoke so eloquently to that of the challenge that you have in California being so geographically widespread and diverse, and I really appreciate Melodie's, you know, the intentionality that you raised, Melodie, around partnering with rural communities in this effort. Because I think about just the broad diversity, you know, across California and having a state like that, it almost begs intentionality, you know, if you're going to go engage in a thoughtful process.

>> Yeah, because I think, you know, we really wanted to create a program that was going to be successful for our youth and for the community of Los Angeles, but, you know, I think at the end of the day we also want to learn from other folks, and we want for folks to be able to learn from us. And so we wanted to create a program that even though it may have been intentionally designed to engage young people in Los Angeles, it's something that could be transferable to other communities with whatever adaptations that they need to make. But it's something that hopefully could work, you know, as universally as possible.

>> Yeah. Well, I'm glad you're raising that. I'd love to move to that question around if others do want to adapt to this project and what you've created here with the Youth Over Violence initiative in their own communities, what kind of advice would you give in terms of adapting it?

>> I think that a really key piece of advice that I would give folks is to include young people during the planning process. Especially if it's the first time that you've done it. You know, Krista mentioned that the institute kind of really takes on its own personality from year to year depending on what community issues are coming from the young people. So in some years, they're more interested in connecting domestic violence or sexual violence to homelessness. In some years, they're really interested in rape kit backlog.

You know, whatever it might be. And so you really need to include young people's voices so that you can find out what's going to be most relevant to them so that they want to engage in that program. And I would also say, you know, to really focus on that evaluation part and think about it as you're working through the planning process. Because it can oftentimes get left to the side or, you know, or it's something that we need to remember to tack on at the end.

But if you can be really intentional from the beginning, then not only are you going to have results at the end so that you can create a stronger program in the following years but can make tweaks as the institute or as your program is happening so that, again, it's just as impactful as possible.

>> Yeah. Excellent advice. Krista, anything to add to that?

>> Yeah. A couple of things that stand out to me is just an overarching recommendation to really start with the strengths that the youth are bringing. You know, so often I think we can

[indiscernible] field to focus on trauma and harm and this institute that's thrived so much because it really begins from a place of strengths and a place of trust that the youth are bringing with them the skills and knowledge that they need with, you know, a great amount of support and additional knowledge and skill-building, but the youth come prepared and knowing what their communities need, knowing what they need. And to really lean into that.

>> Yeah.

>> I also think about just the kind of, you know, kind of schedule and growing. The Youth Over Violence work as it looks now in year nine, Peace Over Violence is a big project that does quite a bit and does quite a bit of it over the summer which, I think usually a quieter time for prevention work when it's usually happening in schools. And so, you know, I think, first of all, knowing you don't have to be a year nine level when you start this project. To start with what seems feasible and what works well for your community and let it grow and evolve from there.

You know, the more rural communities, their rural work has grown over the few years as they've seen what Peace Over Violence, the Youth Over Violence work has looked like, but theirs doesn't look the same, and it's more meaningful for them and their communities in the way it looks. So I think it's a sense of take what you need, take what from this structure can work for your community, and don't be afraid to adapt from there.

>> Yeah. Great. So can you speak to -- I'd like both of you to speak to the impact that you've noticed that the project has had. I mean, I can certainly see it from over here in Pennsylvania. Kind of the impact that the work of this particular project has had. And I'm wondering, you know, how have you seen the impact in your community, in your state on an individual, kind of, what are you seeing? And what can you share with us? So, Melodie, let's start with you.

>> Yeah. I mean, I feel so grateful to be able to say I think I've seen so many different levels of change. I think on an individual basis; I've seen what this program has done for the young people who are participated in it in the past. We have youth who want to return year after year and take on bigger leadership roles. During the institute, I've seen young people be able to include this on their college applications and, you know, be able to get huge scholarships because they can prove their leadership skills through participation in this program.

You know. We solicit applications every year for the 30 young people who will be selected, and I think, you know, the fact that now a days we get, you know, about a hundred applications every summer because there are adults, and partners, and teachers who are really pushing their young people to engage in this type of work is also a big testament. And then we've been lucky enough to share some of our evaluation tools in some state and federal settings. And just seeing that people are really thirsty and hungry for ways to measure their impact with young people. And I've felt really grateful to be able to share a lot of the tools that we've created with those partners who are looking to really be able to quantify the work that we know that they're doing well, but that maybe they didn't have the tools to measure before.

>> Yeah. Excellent. What are you seeing, Krista, from your perspective?

>> You know, I think is that the dissemination of the tools and experiences at the Youth Over Violence Project, kind of, across the state has really helped, you know, provide ideas for other prevention projects that are getting off the ground, or neighbor have been doing great prevention work for a while and are looking to expand it in different ways. So we've certainly seen that. And I will say, part of my role is to educate state leaders about prevention among other issues impacting our communities.

And so often when I start a conversation about preventing domestic violence, I sort of

get a, kind of, confused look and the question of "What does it even look like?" "Can you really prevent domestic violence?" And so quite frankly, the fact that I've had the privilege of getting to work so closely with Melodie for so long means that I often have this as one of the, you know, top examples at my [indiscernible] that I can talk about in terms of what it looks like programmatically how we measure it so that we know that there is impact. And it just is a really great concrete example among many that we can point to say yes we can prevent domestic violence, and here's how.

>> Yeah.

>> So that's been really powerful.

>> Awesome. So, Melodie, anything else that you think would be important for our audience to know? Any final thoughts?

>> I think one thing I would just want to add is that when we think of young leaders, you know, I think we really need to expand, kind of, how we define that. We have young people who are a part of the program year after year who, you know, are maybe going to be valedictorian at their school. They serve as class president. But we also have students who have been on probation. Or who are coming out juvenile detention or whatever it might be, but just because, you know, maybe you're not seeing leadership skills or leadership quantities that you would think of so quickly doesn't mean that these young people don't have ideas. Doesn't mean that they don't have the skills to engage their peers and engage the adults around them.

And I actually think that because of such of the diverse experiences and stories that these young people bring, it just adds north dimension to the learning that they're getting from the Peace Over Violence staff, but also from each other. And so just to remember that there is potential in young people, and that, you know, nothing -- none of the issues that we have as a society can we address without including young people's voices.

>> Yeah. Excellent. Great point. Thank you so much. And thanks for the reminder, you know, to all of us as adults who are listening to check our adultism and I feel like you're also raising a point about checking sort of, you know, our white supremacy culture in the way the things that we value and being intentionally shifting those things. Excellent. Thank you, Melodie. I so appreciate it.

Krista, is there, you know, last thing, you want to add in our last minute together.

>> You know, I don't think I could have said it any better than Melodie. So I'm going to let her have the last word on reminders for us all.

>> Thank you. Well, it has been an absolute pleasure to talk with both of you about with the Youth Over Violence Leadership Institute and Internship program. I'm so excited about the work that you've been doing over these nine years. Excited to see what's going to come next. And, Melodie, if people want to learn more about Youth Over Violence what should they do?

>> They should go to our website which is peaceoverviolence.org, and we also have an Instagram account dedicated just to the Youth Over Violence program, and you can find us on Instagram at Youth Over Violence.

>> Perfect. All right. Well, thanks so much. It's been a pleasure.

>> Thank you, Casey.

>> Thank you.

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