



Teen violence help may be a click away

BY JIM MOORE REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Advocates, using a state grant, are crafting a high-tech tool to help victims of teen violence find support, and educate their peers through cell phones.

The Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence partnered in recent months with two other state nonprofit groups to gather opinions and input from teens across the state about how and where to deliver the messages of prevention, raise awareness and offer resources for victims. The focus groups and survey consensus were not a surprise to those who work with teens: if you want to get teens' attention, use their phones.

"They really like everything to go from their phone," said Marlene Berg, associate director of the Institute for Community Research, a Hartford nonprofit that ran focus groups in Hartford and East Hampton seeking teen opinion on both the issues surrounding dating violence and the creation of a smart phone application.

Teens, Berg said, do get information by other means, but those who have the latest generation of sophisticated phones prefer the pocket-sized platform. "They don't necessarily want to go to a computer to go to a website."

One in 10 Connecticut teens reported being the victim of physical abuse at the hands of a boyfriend or girlfriend in the previous 12 months, and nearly twice that number reported emotional or verbal abuse by a boyfriend or girlfriend on a 2009 state survey.

The application now being engineered at Farmington-based Walker Systems Support will most likely be the first of its kind, according to Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence spokeswoman Linda Blozie, who said research found no comparable product.

The Pew Charitable Trust is among the large national nonprofits that has begun to research and evaluate cell phones and related devices as a means of getting messages out, though it remains to be seen just how effective the medium will be, Berg said.

"A lot of groups obviously are thinking about using this technology for health messages and

other kinds of things," Berg said.

One clear message from the conversations with Connecticut teens is that easier is better: teens are more inclined to send messages through social networking websites like Facebook than they are to use e-mail, which requires an extra step or two, and more inclined to send text messages than call.

"They phone their parents and their relatives and they text their friends, by the way," Berg said.

Blozie said a \$45,000 state grant, part of the federal economic stimulus package approved last year, is financing the creation of the new application.

Berg said the application will include a mix of information and resources, likely including quizzes for teens to take that can help them identify abusive or potentially abusive behavior by a dating partner. Some form of social networking — another favorite teen pasttime — may also be incorporated, because teens are more interested in learning through the stories and experiences of other teens than they are in statistics.

The concept, Berg said, is to provide help for victims, show teens how to help their friends and raise awareness among teens in general.

The coalition also enlisted the help of the Center for Youth Leadership, a nonprofit organization based at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk, where 81 teens sat down for focus groups to help flesh out what the smart phone program should, and should not include.

The application itself "has to be completely nondescript," said Bob Kocienda, the center's director. Teens noted that a girl (most victims of teen dating violence are female) who clicks on an application with a title screen announcing its intent could make matters worse for herself if the abuser catches on.

Peggy Panagrossi, executive director of Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury, a nonprofit organization that serves victims of domestic and sexual violence, agreed that a smart phone is an ideal device to reach teens. Panagrossi said teen dating violence is more common than many people think, and follows patterns nearly identical to those seen in abusive adult relationships. Most often, violence is a behavior that manifests following a progression that begins with control.

"They will tell you how to wear your hair, how to dress," Panagrossi said. Girls often feel flattered by the attention, and may not be aware that the underlying issue is control, she added. "It's a lot of control. That's how it starts out in dating relationships."

Berg said quizzes may prove to be a useful tool to screen potential or actual abuse victims and begin to direct them to help. The application may also include links to videos, music or other multimedia presentations, as the popularity of these forms of electronic communication was resoundingly confirmed by the focus groups.

A test version of the application is expected in January, and the focus groups will be given the first look. Their feedback will be used to refine the final release, expected in February or early March. What is less certain is the application's future.

The grant dollars awarded to date will not support an ongoing effort to monitor or maintain the program. Kocienda said that could be an issue, based on feedback gathered from teens.

"It had to be continually updated. Someone's got to maintain it," Kocienda said. Teens will quickly lose interest if the content becomes noticeably dated, which can happen in a matter of weeks or months..