

For Immediate Release
May 15, 2007

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Programs help teach teenage men about reproductive health

By Chris J. Minnick

Plain Talk, a new teen pregnancy prevention program in Doña Ana County will help teens and parents develop the skills and tools they need to communicate effectively about reducing risky sexual behavior.

The South Valley Male Involvement Program in Albuquerque is teaching young men about personal responsibility and reproductive health. Francisco Ronquillo, program coordinator, said it is critical to teach teenage men that they have an important role in stopping the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and preventing pregnancies.

“Men play a crucial role in reproduction so it’s time for us to get involved and pay more attention to the young men in our communities,” Ronquillo said. “We have a lot of support programs for females, but there is a lot of work to be done with our male population.”

A similar program will begin this fall at the Gadsden High School. Travis Leyva, a disease prevention specialist at the department’s Las Cruces Public Health Office, said the program will include group presentations and individual education.

“Reproductive health in men is often ignored,” Leyva said. “Even when a man has a physical they do not ask to be checked for sexually transmitted diseases. And because they can be carriers of a disease and not show any symptoms, the only time they find out is when their partner becomes positive.”

Leyva said the Gadsden Male Involvement Program will focus on several ways to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancies, including education about abstinence. Participation in the program is voluntary.

“When I talk to teens about sexually transmitted diseases, I ask them if they know the only way to be 100 percent safe, and most of them say it’s by using a condom,” Leyva said. “Many of them don’t realize that the only way to be completely safe is to abstain from sexual activity, so we want to introduce that concept to them.”

Deborah Chettinger, a nurse at the Las Cruces Public Health Office who provides family planning services to teenage girls, said young men are just as interested in learning about reproductive health, but do not have the same opportunities as women.

“Men need the same information as women if they are going to keep their relationship safe and healthy and to help them avoid an unplanned pregnancy,” Chettinger said. “It’s not just a responsibility of a woman because having a child very much affects both partners.”

The South Valley Male Involvement Program uses peers to help carry the message to other teens about the importance of learning about reproductive health. Martin Martinez, an 18-year-old from Albuquerque who works as an intern for the program, said what first attracted him to the program was the positive feedback from friends who were participating.

“This was really the first time for me that I was exposed to thinking about not just reproductive health, but my overall health. I learned I have a responsibility to take care of myself and the people around me,” Martinez said. “One thing that drew me into this project is the way they make males feel comfortable about talking about sexual health.”

Martinez, who will attend New Mexico State University in the spring 2007 semester, said he hopes to continue his work with the program in Las Cruces and pass on the valuable lessons he has learned. “Be responsible for the actions you take and be respectful of people around you,” Martinez said.

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