



A Community-Centered Approach to Program Implementation

Insights from the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety Evaluation

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KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Importance of **incorporating peer learning opportunities during facilitator training**

Value of **hiring facilitators from the community**

Importance of creating opportunities to revisit the curriculum with an eye for **relevance and equity**

Adapting the program curriculum and structure to different community needs

Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS) is an aspirational adolescent pregnancy prevention program that empowers youth and their caretakers to challenge gendered and societal norms, build healthy relationships, and connect with local health services. The Urban Institute developed the PASS program in 2012 in partnership with the DC Housing Authority and residents and community-based organizations from the Benning Terrace Development using a community-based participatory research approach. In 2017, Urban began a quasi-experimental evaluation of the program in partnership with Sasha Bruce Youthwork (Sasha Bruce). Urban and Sasha Bruce expanded PASS to four other communities in Washington, DC, to determine whether the program leads to certain outcomes for young people compared with alternative community-based programming at different sites.

The PASS intervention comprises two gender-specific curricula: Sisters Rising and Brothers Rising. The Sisters Rising and Brothers Rising intervention is structured to facilitate small group discussions, role playing, take-home exercises, bonding, and skills building. Core elements include gender-based, age-specific, and culturally responsive content and learning tools; assertive communication and safe boundaries training; information about gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and assault; bystander intervention; examination of real-life scenarios that make it difficult to foster and negotiate healthy dating and sexual relationships; emphasis on shared partner responsibility in consistently practicing safe sex; and connections with trusted adults and local service providers.

PASS's community-centered approach to program implementation is an integral aspect of the model and our evaluation. Drawing on ongoing project process documentation and reflections from the research team, community partners, and program facilitators, this fact sheet highlights program implementation successes, challenges, and lessons learned throughout the PASS evaluation.

IMPLEMENTING THE PASS MODEL

Our PASS implementation partner Sasha Bruce is one of the largest youth services providers in DC and works in communities across the district. We determined that having one implementation partner would help ensure consistency across sites and strengthen the evaluation. Across sites, Sasha Bruce worked closely with community leaders, parents, and young people themselves to determine the most appropriate timing and format for the program, programming locations, and program facilitators. A core feature of the PASS model is that a sexual health educator and a trained co-facilitator from the community of the respective site facilitate each cohort. This practice ensures that facilitators and youth have shared context and experiences; participants and their communities can sustain newly gained skills and knowledge beyond the duration of the program; and programming is responsive to neighborhood events and context.

HOW DID PASS'S COMMUNITY-CENTERED APPROACH STRENGTHEN PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION?

- **Increased recruitment and retention.** Sasha Bruce ensured that parents were comfortable enrolling their children in programming by working closely with community members ahead of time to determine scheduling, location, and the best format for their context. This strategy increased the number of young people recruited to participate and their retention in the program over time.
- **Improved participation and engagement.** Hiring community facilitators from each individual site helped establish a level of familiarity with the young people. Even if participants did not previously know the facilitators, their shared context and experiences created a common foundation from which to build relationships. Because facilitators lived in the community, they had additional opportunities to build and sustain connections with youth outside of programming.
- **Improved responsiveness to community events and context.** By working in partnership with community members, the PASS team was able to stay informed of and quickly adjust to events in the community, such as incidents of gun violence. Adjustments included rescheduling programming, moving locations, making space to discuss current events, and reaching out to offer support to youth outside of programming.
- **Built community capacity.** By training members of each community in the PASS model, we ensured that the associated skills and knowledge will remain in the community beyond the life of the evaluation. These include, for example, youth engagement and facilitation skills and the sexual and reproductive health knowledge provided in the curriculum.

REFLECTIONS FROM PASS FACILITATORS

"Community facilitators make a huge difference—they can build on the existing foundation with these kids to take their relationships above and beyond. I know the kids see a bit of themselves in the facilitators."

—Courtney Gibbs, PASS program lead, Sasha Bruce

"I live in DC, so when I'm out minding my business, I know I'm going to run into these kids. When they run up to me saying 'Miss Tamica!' it makes me happy, because I know when they get older, they're gonna remember me."

—Tamica Young, former PASS program facilitator

"If I write a curriculum, I think it just boils down to the facilitator. This is what I really believe. And that's where I will put my attention on, because they say that one engagement with a positive teacher could change a person's life...I can tell you all these nuances about STDs, leadership, and this sort of thing, but if I got a facilitator who cares about me, and my mom never cares about me, that's going to change my life."

—Cameron Brannum, PASS program facilitator

"And I always lead in vulnerabilities. I feel like as a facilitator, I engage in the conversation, but also, I lead the conversation. Right?...So I always try to leave that space for me to also show them that, okay, I can let down the wall too...I'm as engaged with this, and this is how I've grown from that. I never show them the struggle. I always showed them success, so that's been my motto...I share what I overcome."

—Will Anderson, PASS program facilitator

- **Created lasting relationships.** The community-centered approach to PASS gave youth access to supportive adults who will be in the community even after programming ends. Community facilitators also invested in young people outside of programming hours, extending systems of support beyond the time spent in sessions. The programming also provided opportunities for participants to develop deeper bonds with each other, as PASS encouraged sharing life experiences and facilitated peer support and advocacy.

WHICH IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES DID PASS ENCOUNTER?

- **Logistical challenges in less familiar communities.** When Sasha Bruce began to bring PASS to communities where it had few existing relationships, it was often difficult to secure a location for programming. This meant that staff had to spend additional resources and time on logistics rather than on programming and surveying. To overcome this challenge, Sasha Bruce and Urban worked with community members and DC Housing Authority resident councils to ensure that communities were interested in PASS and that the timing was appropriate. Wherever possible, we worked through existing relationships where trust had already been established.
- **Facilitator training and turnover.** Based on lessons from the PASS pilot, we intended for each facilitator to experience the curriculum as a learner in addition to a teacher. This practice proved especially difficult when Sasha Bruce was experiencing high levels of staff turnover. As a result, Sasha Bruce began promoting from within the organization to fill vacant lead facilitator roles, including by hiring a former PASS participant. Sasha Bruce also began focusing its efforts on recruiting and training community-based facilitators, who have proven to turn over much less frequently and demonstrate a deep commitment to the work.
- **Difficulty building new relationships.** The team originally estimated that 480 young people would participate in the PASS program across sites, based on experiences from the pilot and the number of eligible young people living in each of our selected implementation sites. However, this target ultimately was not feasible because of the program and evaluation design as well as unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We underestimated how challenging it would be for our sole implementation partner to work in communities where it did not already have deep relationships. In communities where Sasha Bruce had existing relationships and deep connections with community leaders and families, programming and survey implementation went smoothly. In other communities, Sasha Bruce had newer or less-established relationships and required additional time and resources to earn the trust of community members and handle other logistics. To build connections in newer communities, Sasha Bruce organized community-building events such as cook-outs, back-to-school gatherings, and movie nights. Hiring community-based staff for recruitment and facilitation also improved overall enrollment and retention.
- **The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.** During the beginning of the pandemic and lockdown, Urban and our partners postponed PASS programming in order to prioritize youth safety and allow partners to focus on meeting communities' basic needs, resulting in an eight-month gap in programming. Although Sasha Bruce still engaged youth and families in these communities in other ways, the interruption of in-person interaction and programming made it challenging to reach young people in the moment as well as reengage them once programming resumed. During this hiatus, Urban and Sasha Bruce worked together to pivot programming to virtual and socially distanced formats, including by conducting sessions over Zoom or outdoors, facilitating smaller groups to minimize exposure, and using social media for better youth engagement. The interruption in programming and new delivery strategies as a result of the pandemic, while imperative to protect young people and facilitators from COVID-19 exposure and infection, decreased the number of youth Sasha Bruce was able to engage and retain in programming.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- **Revisit the curriculum with an eye for relevance and equity.** Language and community contexts are constantly evolving, and it was important for the PASS curriculum to reflect that. Over time, facilitators noticed that certain videos and examples included in the curriculum were no longer as relevant to young people. They also noted that the curriculum could incorporate more inclusive language around gender-expansive identities and combat

stereotypes around sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Young people were also very interested in statistics related to the curriculum's various topic areas, such as STIs, teen pregnancy and contraceptive use, and dating and healthy relationships. During the sessions, facilitators often added their own examples and videos to better engage young people and searched for additional information in response to their questions. With the help of facilitators, the team was able to review and revise the curriculum to address these areas, improving the curriculum for future use.

- **Develop robust training for facilitators that is revisited regularly.** Over the course of the evaluation, it was important to offer facilitators training on the curriculum as well as on topics such as positive youth development, facilitation and room management, teamwork and team management, and community building. A key component of this training is incorporating teach-backs, which allow facilitators to experience the curriculum as both a learner and a teacher and refine their facilitation skills. This practice can help reveal any misconceptions or biases facilitators may have and offers an opportunity to reflect on how young people will receive certain topics and examples. Teach-backs allow facilitators to connect their own lived experiences with the session content and can help them process personal experiences and trauma. In order to ensure cohesion across facilitators, especially in the event of staff turnover, it was crucial to regularly revisit training topics and reflect on how to adjust curriculum delivery to better engage youth participants.
- **Adapt to community needs.** Although we originally designed the PASS model as a 10-week curriculum, it became apparent over the course of the evaluation that this format would not work for every community. Based on conversations with community members, parents, and youth, Sasha Bruce was able to condense programming into a shorter “intensive” format that worked well over holiday or summer breaks as well as for youth in residential care settings. Beyond the scheduling structure, it was important that Sasha Bruce and Urban continually adjusted to community needs. Sometimes this meant scheduling programming right after school so participants could walk home in daylight; other times, it meant delaying the start of a cohort when parents were uncomfortable sending their children to in-person sessions because of community safety concerns. During the initial COVID-19 shutdown, for example, Sasha Bruce postponed programming to prioritize community safety and focus its efforts on meeting the basic needs of youth and families. When programming resumed, Urban worked with Sasha Bruce to develop delivery strategies aimed at minimizing COVID-19 exposure and maximizing youth engagement. This flexibility and willingness to adapt demonstrated that the PASS team genuinely cared about meeting the needs of young people and their families, helping build trust and stronger relationships within each community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

- The PASS evaluation showed us that a curriculum is only ever as good as its facilitator and the relationships between the facilitators and participants. Investing in facilitators from the communities themselves can promote sustainability and minimize turnover. Above all, this evaluation showed that genuine connections and relationships with partners and young people are what made PASS successful. Without these relationships, engaging youth in programming and retaining them for follow-up surveys would have been nearly impossible.
- Communities, even those within the same city, are diverse and have different needs. For a community-centered model to be effective, implementation partners need space and flexibility to adapt the model to each community's individual context. Adaptations may include offering alternative scheduling structures, prioritizing specific content based on interests expressed by the participants, and adjusting cohort timing and locations to keep staff and youth safe.
- The rigorous evaluation requirements to determine whether PASS was an evidence-based model placed constraints on program implementation, which ultimately impeded the quality of program delivery. For example, the first round of surveys marked the first time many participants would interact with the facilitators. This proved to be an invasive and less engaging experience than facilitators would have preferred, creating an additional hurdle to relationship building and retention. Additionally, based on the evaluation requirements,

young people were not able to join PASS programming after the first session, which resulted in the exclusion of would-be participants. A community-centered approach to program implementation makes fidelity to a rigid research design and model difficult, as rigidity does not allow space for the deep relationships and trust building required for success in this work.

ADDITIONAL READING

In Their Own Words: Why Community-Based Facilitators Are Crucial to the Success of Youth Programs

Jessica Shakesprere, Nora Hakizimana, and Lauren Farrell. <https://urbn.is/3euwIK8>.

In Their Own Words: Why Investing in Trusted Community-Based Organizations is Crucial to Sustainability

Elsa Falkenburger, Lauren Farrell, and Eona Harrison.

<https://urbn.is/3g8vwgt>.

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