Strengthening Program Implementation and Evaluation Through Community-Based Partnerships

Insights from the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety Evaluation

Eleanor Lauderback and Elsa Falkenburger

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Value of working with **partners who have existing deep and meaningful relationships** with the community

Importance of **developing programming alongside community partners**

Need to balance the requirements of a rigorous evaluation with **investments in strong relationships with partners, youth, and their communities**

Ability to **prepare for and respond to unexpected events** affecting the community

Importance of **investing in partners' priorities** in addition to the project 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.

From the beginning of the design and pilot phase, strong partnerships have been the foundation for the PASS program's success. Drawing on ongoing project process documentation and reflections from the research team, community partners, and program facilitators, this fact sheet highlights partnership successes, challenges, and lessons learned throughout our evaluation.

HOW DID WE DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN STRONG PARTNERSHIPS?

To facilitate implementation and ensure the sustainability of this work beyond the life of the PASS program, Urban intentionally worked to identify partners with longstanding, strong relationships in the communities they serve as well as demonstrated experience supporting youth. Many of these partners either had previous experience working with Urban or were identified by existing partners. Urban kicked off the project with a meeting of all stakeholders, including the DC Housing Authority's Office of Resident Services, Sasha Bruce Youthwork (the lead program implementation partner), our various comparison programming partners, and site-specific resident councils.

Early on, Urban staff reached out to potential partners and community residents to talk about their lives, work, and interest in collaborating on the PASS initiative. We attempted to be fully transparent about our positionality as researchers and non-community residents and conveyed project details such as the timeline, budget, scope of work, and potential for collaboration. The Urban team also included one staff member who is a public housing resident, demonstrating our intent to prioritize community opportunity, preferences, and vision in our collaborative approach. Finally, we assigned a site liaison to each of the sites, giving partners a specific person to communicate with and turn to for support.

Once Urban established mutual trust with our partners, we maintained these relationships by checking in often and showing support for their communities outside of project time. This support included regularly scheduled meetings with the full group of partners, in addition to one-on-one check-ins between each partner and their designated site liaison.

SPOTLIGHT ON OUR PARTNERS

Sasha Bruce Youthwork is our PASS program implementation partner, working with public housing communities at Greenleaf, Richardson, James Creek/Syphax, Highland, New Beginnings, and the Sasha Bruce House in Washington, DC. Sasha Bruce is one of the largest youth services providers in the district, helping young people find safe homes, achieve and maintain good physical and mental health, create and strengthen supportive and stable families, and explore education and career opportunities.
Website: https://www.sashabruce.org/

Brotha's Huddle is our comparison partner at Potomac Gardens in Ward 6. Brotha's Huddle has been working with youth and young adults in and around DC public housing communities for more than 20 years to help them realize their potential.

Exodus Treatment Center is our comparison site partner at Woodland Terrace in Ward 8. Exodus has provided trauma-informed, comprehensive prevention and supportive services to community residents across wards 6, 7, and 8 for 15 years.
Website: https://exodustreatmentcenter.com/

Kenilworth Rec is our comparison partner at Kenilworth Parkside Resident Management Corporation Apartments in Ward 7. For more than two decades, Kenilworth Rec has served as a safe space for youth, providing sports, extracurriculars, and mentorship.

Yaay Me! Inc. is our comparison partner in the Somerset and MLK communities. Yaay Me! supports youth and adults in DC through leadership and career development programming, entrepreneurship education, and gun violence prevention initiatives.
Website: https://www.yaayme.org/

HOW DID OUR PARTNERSHIPS STRENGTHEN THE PASS EVALUATION?

- **Increased recruitment and retention.** Our partners' strong existing relationships with youth and families in their communities made recruitment for programming easier. We found that young people were already familiar with PASS and more interested in joining, parents were more supportive, and facilitators could better ensure regular attendance.

- **Improved survey completion rates and data quality.** We trained all our partners in survey administration, and their close relationships with young people were invaluable in motivating participants to complete the lengthy and personal surveys thoughtfully and honestly. Our partners helped coordinate survey collection with other community events to maximize the number of young people present during each of the four rounds of data collection.

- **Contextualized findings within community contexts.** Data walks and other opportunities for input from partners throughout the project period helped the research team more accurately interpret findings and situate what we saw in the data within each partner's community context.

- **Guided implementation to meet community needs and expectations.** Our partners provided needed feedback on survey implementation and programming to meet community standards and ensure that families and community leadership were on board with the project. This feedback helped Urban and our partners deliver quality youth programming and a quality evaluation, as well as maintain strong relationships with these communities, which is key to the sustainability of this work.

WHAT PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES DID THE PASS EVALUATION FACE?

- **Staff turnover.** Staff turnover on both the Urban team and our partner teams over the course of the project presented a key challenge to the relationships we had built over time, requiring continuous effort to maintain mutual trust and respect. Outside of project time, Urban staff attended funerals, organized meal deliveries, and spent time with our community partners; these efforts were integral to maintaining strong, trusting relationships with our partners and young people, even during times of hardship.

- **Unexpected events in our partner communities.** Working in multiple communities in DC affected by gun violence created a need for established protocols in the event of a shooting—as well as flexibility around programming and surveying timelines—in order to keep young people and facilitators safe and to respond to the emotional needs of the affected community. In addition to offering flexibility, using principles of trauma-informed care helped guide our interactions with young people and community members, especially following instances of violence.

- **Unpredictable schedules.** Our partners were not always available during work hours and often had immediate concerns arise in their communities, which took precedence over PASS–related work. Our team employed multiple modes of communication—including regularly scheduled group meetings, texting, phone calls, and in-person meetings—to ensure a shared understanding of priorities and next steps, give opportunities for partners to voice concerns, and provide whatever supports they needed.

- **The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.** When the pandemic began, our partners had to prioritize meeting the needs of their communities, who were in crisis. Our partners' communities were among the hardest hit by COVID-19 in DC in terms of infection and death rates as well as unemployment and financial insecurity. Our partners pivoted to meeting the basic needs of youth and families, including by supplying food, cleaning supplies, and personal protective equipment; helping families access the technology and Wi-Fi needed to succeed in remote work and school; and providing personal support and school supplies for youth during remote learning. As a result, we postponed PASS activities until our partners felt they had mechanisms in place to support their communities and until we were able to co-develop protocols to minimize COVID-19 exposures and safely implement programming and surveying. These measures included using a combination of Zoom, Facetime, phone calls, and texts to connect with participants, as well as holding events outdoors and remaining socially distanced.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- **Identify partners with existing, deep community relationships.** A key lesson learned was the value and importance of working with community partners who are already an engrained part of our target communities. When our partners had strong existing relationships with community members and the resident councils, they were more easily able to recruit and retain young people, coordinate space and logistics for programming and surveys, and reconnect with participants for follow-up surveys. This benefit is evident from our enrollment and attendance numbers, as well as our survey numbers among these sites and cohorts. Stronger relationships also allowed our partners to better respond in moments of crisis, such as when violence occurred in the community or during the pandemic lockdown. Our programming was most successful when partners were able to cultivate organic and lasting relationships with young people and the larger community, rather than transactional and temporary relationships.

- **Invest in your partnerships.** Strong partnerships take time, resources, and intentionality from the outset of a project. Establishing mutual trust and respect with our partners was not only the ethical decision but also improved the implementation and outcomes of the evaluation. Building relationships based on trust and accountability ensured open and honest communication, willingness to work through challenges together, commitment to implementing the project as intended, and ability to creatively adapt to emergency and crisis situations.

- **Create safety protocols early on.** It would have been helpful to work with community leaders, parents, and facilitators at the beginning of the project to create a safety protocol for program and project staff, such as in the event of a shooting or other incident of violence. Important questions that arose included what staff should do if they are onsite when an act of violence occurs; who in the community they should connect with to ensure everyone's safety; and how to determine when it is safe enough and when the community is ready to resume programming and/or surveying.

- **Be transparent.** It was crucial to be transparent with our program partners about our obligations to our funder—the Administration on Children, Youth and Families—at the beginning of and throughout the project. Transparency meant sharing the agency's expectations from this evaluation and highlighting how these expectations would affect Urban and our program partners. Being transparent also helped us remain aligned in our purpose to provide quality programming for young people and deliver a quality evaluation.

- **Include partners in the process of evaluation design.** The Urban team made several decisions about the scope of the evaluation up front, including the number of sites and number of young people to recruit for each cohort. By the time partners were able to weigh in, it was too late to change the evaluation design. For future projects, we should ask partners to review our research design before making final decisions and beginning project implementation.

- **Invest time and resources in securing buy-in and ensuring mutual benefits at the beginning.** Community residents at Benning Terrace originally designed and implemented the PASS curriculum. When working with new partners, who were not involved in the program design, it was challenging to envision what programming might look like after the evaluation. Rapid turnover at Sasha Bruce at the beginning of the project also added complexity to the situation, as the team had to prioritize onboarding new staff to begin programming and had little time for long-term sustainability planning. Rather than developing a highly defined, long-term plan for the program, Urban could have documented a set of resources and options for collaboration to ensure the communities would not feel abandoned at the end of the evaluation, as well as allowed partners to refine or continue the programming if interested.

- **Ask partners for feedback on data collection instruments and processes.** Although the Urban team asked for feedback on the survey questions and design, we were not always clear about the purpose of that feedback and where it fit into the larger evaluation. Providing a clearer overview of the research and evaluation processes and explaining how Urban and our partners could use the survey data would have allowed partners to engage more

meaningfully in the research design work. Finally, given the involvement of our partners in helping us field the survey, providing them with an opportunity to pilot the survey themselves would have been more productive than simply asking them to review the questions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

A key theme that emerged from our analysis was the need to balance the structural requirements of a rigorous program and evaluation with investment in strong relationships with partners, community members, and young people. Urban was able to invest in our partners and community sites outside of the project's requirements, which in turn supported the success of the evaluation. Organizations can conduct successful, rigorous evaluations using a community-engaged approach, but this requires transparency, strong relationships with all partners, trust, and accountability. Some important takeaways for the future include:

- Ensuring that the project and collaboration are mutually beneficial to all partners. When the going gets rough, everyone needs to feel invested in the program's success and motivated to overcome challenges.

- Discussing sustainability or the future of the partnership from the start and revisiting this issue periodically to modify the long-term vision for the work together. Allowing space to think outside the box is essential to sustaining partnerships over time.

- Finding time and resources to collaborate with partners beyond the immediate confines of the program evaluation. This can be a challenging aspect of the work, but it also offers an opportunity to gather greater contextual information and build trust that can improve program implementation and evaluation over time.

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**.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eleanor Lauderback is a research associate in the Center for Labor, Human Services, and Population. Her research focuses on child, youth, and family well-being and community engagement in the research process.

Elsa Falkenburger is a principal research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute and chair of the Community Engaged Methods Resource Center. She co-directed the PASS project. Falkenburger regularly provides technical assistance and trainings and develops practical guides for implementing community-engaged methods and applied research that prioritizes racial equity and inclusion.