

Rape Prevention and Education Program Achieves Successes during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020- 2021)

Background: The California Department of Public Health’s (CDPH) Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) Program is positively impacting sexual violence (SV) prevention among participants across the State of California. The RPE Program is a part of a national sexual violence prevention program funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDPH supports 24 grant-funded rape crisis centers throughout the state to conduct sexual violence prevention projects in their local communities using school-based and community mobilization approaches. As part of their RPE requirements, they collected quantitative and qualitative data from project participants. Two types of participant outcome data were collected by project facilitators from project participants: 1) pre- and post- surveys collecting quantitative data and 2) facilitated discussions providing qualitative data. Additionally, data on the how and what was done to implement these prevention projects was collected monthly from projects, as well as tracking of community-level impacts of the RPE projects (e.g., policy or protocol changes). **This brief report represents process data from these 24 rape crisis centers during their second year of project implementation, from August 2020 to July 2021, and documents their implementation during the major disruptions presented by the COVID-19 Pandemic and social upheaval.**

Challenges and Resiliency in the Face of COVID-19



All of CDPH’s RPE projects were significantly impacted by the shelter-in-place restrictions and distance learning for schools starting in March 2020. Many after-effects of these challenges persisted during the 2021-2022 school-year, as RPE projects seek to reconnect with schools and communities.

RPE project staff responded in creative and flexible ways to ensure the continued and responsive implementation of SV prevention projects during COVID-19. They embraced the momentum of social movements to work toward ending all forms of oppression. Major shifts were experienced across RPE projects, prevention staff, youth and adult participants.

RPE Projects As the world went into lockdown, RPE project facilitation mostly paused to focus on supporting participants, providing a safe space for participants to express themselves, and engaging in team building and community sustaining activities. There was an increased need for social and emotional support, and youth and adults struggled during the pandemic to process grief and isolation. Furthermore, RPE projects spearheaded community care and mutual aid efforts with partners in order to meet the needs of their communities.

Prevention Staff Shifting from implementing SV curricula in-person to virtually presented challenges for RPE projects in several ways. Pulling together funds for additional software and learning platforms and the learning curve for staff to make these adjustments took time. Ensuring confidentiality and setting up protocols for response to violence disclosures in a virtual space was another challenge. Keeping staff morale up was difficult and filling open staff positions presented issues for project momentum and engagement. An increased focus on self-care among staff and their RPE project participants heightened during the pandemic.

“ The challenge of the COVID-19 mandates continues for not only [...] our team but for our community. We are finding students are more frequently becoming less engaged in not only their school activities but extracurricular ones as well. In speaking with school administration, we are all at a loss on how to engage students. Incentives no longer seem to be working either. ”

RPE FACILITATOR

Youth Engagement and retention of youth, even with creative adaptations to RPE project implementation, remained very difficult. RPE facilitators found that youth were overwhelmed, severely stressed, and sad to be missing out on school experiences and social connection.

Adults RPE projects with adults struggled with recruitment. However, once adult participants were recruited, their engagement seemed to increase during COVID-19. Adult participants who struggled with using technology increased their tech-literacy through the shift to online implementation. Adults were grateful for a place to connect with people and expressed that they were proud to be doing work to help their community.

Despite these major barriers, RPE project implementation and learning continued. Creative and innovative ways to address challenges were developed, including:

CHALLENGE ————— **INNOVATION**

**Youth engagement /
Pervasive stress
and struggle:**

Virtual “office hours” held every week for students to support them
Individual or group text message check-ins

Confidentiality

During online RPE sessions, facilitators had youth come up with a phrase that would let other students know that what they were about to say was confidential, and to make the needed adjustments (i.e., move somewhere private, use headphones, etc.)

School engagement

Fostered relationships with organizations outside of schools who had successfully established relationships within the school in order to recruit youth. somewhere private, use headphones, etc.)

RPE Project Implementation and Activities During COVID-19

Learning about how the RPE projects were implemented, what activities were implemented, and who the populations of focus were, can provide insight on the RPE Program within different communities in California.

WHO: Across all RPE projects, **2,171 ongoing adult and youth participants** were reached with multiple sessions of RPE curriculum or project engagement. Of these ongoing participants, **399 were youth leadership participants** who joined what is typically a year-long club or group that met multiple times per month to learn and implement SV prevention efforts.

WHAT: Process data shows that RPE projects engaged in a wide variety of activities to reduce SV in schools and communities, facilitating **8,749 activities or events** that engaged nearly **250,000 community members or student participants** (individuals who participated in more than one event are double counted in this estimate).



SCHOOL-BASED RPE PROJECTS: When working in schools became challenging, school-based RPE projects focused their efforts on fostering relationships with organizations and community leaders outside of schools and SV prevention policy development to meet school needs. Project efforts that could take place virtually adapted to this new way of convening, and in small groups, these new online spaces provided a safe space for youth to connect and process fear and stress.

School-based RPE project activities:

- Campaigning virtually to change school policy around gendered bathrooms and setting up “safe spaces” in schools for LGBTQ+ youth during “return-to-learn” efforts
- Engaging school superintendents, city councils, and local politicians in-person and virtually around policy/protocol change related to SV prevention

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION RPE PROJECTS:

Community mobilization project adult and youth organizing teams promoted community connectedness during COVID-19 through various activities such as community mapping, community beautification murals, and connecting through art campaigns to address the intersectionality of race and violence. This work brought communities together during a time of isolation and divisiveness. Particularly for adults, RPE projects became a space to foster mutual support and aid for one another and the community during a difficult time.

Community mobilization RPE project activities:

- Engaging grassroots organizations focused on racial justice and art to create an SV prevention campaign
- Working with community mental health and law enforcement to create awareness around SV prevention
- Creating community murals or fostering safe public spaces



The community-based RPE project (Close to Home) at Alliance for Community Transformations worked with the Planada, CA community to create this public mural about violence prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

HOW: For school-based projects, community building activities/events leading up to community actions, school-wide actions/events, facilitating one-time presentations and ongoing RPE curriculum were the activities in which they engaged in the most with community members. School-based projects also engaged in administering community assessments and action-planning meetings. To ensure students access to RPE curricula, many RPE projects transitioned curricula online or developed recorded video series of curricula that were presented to students during class. To continue engaging with students in the virtual space, some RPE projects participated in school activities that had been moved online, such as “virtual club days” in order to recruit participants. Engaging with school administrators and staff was a challenge during COVID-19 due to the burden schools were experiencing to support virtual learning.

In addition to social media and phone-based outreach efforts, community mobilization projects engaged with community members most frequently via ads for media campaigns, art/storytelling events, events to recruit more RPE members, and coalition/stakeholder meetings. Community mobilization projects primarily engaged in the above activities, as well as facilitating virtual curricula with ongoing RPE participants, one-on-one relational meetings with community members, and administering community assessments.

ADJUSTING THE “HOW” FOR COVID-19:

During COVID-19 related restrictions on in-person gatherings, engaging the community via social media, email, and text became an important tool for RPE programming. Social media posts and email/text

communications increased, while actual engagement with posts/communications was difficult to measure. There were also sometimes challenges related to using social media as a communication tool during COVID, for example, some schools did not allow engagement with students via social media.

Conclusion

CDPH's RPE Program was greatly impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. Yet, despite the challenges, RPE efforts at state and local levels worked tirelessly to adapt to continue to work toward reducing SV and other forms of oppression. While the challenges created by the COVID-19 Pandemic are far from over, the future is bright for RPE projects, as they have taken the opportunity to build infrastructure to support more flexible RPE implementation.

While the pandemic was endlessly challenging for RPE facilitators, great resiliency was demonstrated in the herculean efforts to adapt programs and continue implementation. **For RPE participants who stayed connected to RPE projects, many showed continued willingness to engage, despite the barriers. These participants expressed their gratitude for the RPE Program providing a space to be with people, even if it was online.**

