

## Keeping the Faith

*"Your work on the Rights, Respect, Responsibility® outreach is outstanding. I am convinced that your approach is a model for truly improving the lives of our youth."*

member, Quaker faith

*"I was impressed with the strong leadership Planned Parenthood provided in rallying diverse individuals from various faiths to sit together for this discussion."*

Presbyterian minister

*"Thank you for doing God's work. Planned Parenthood is providing wonderful service for the community."*

Catholic priest

These and other powerful endorsements came in response to Planned Parenthood Health Services of Southwestern Oregon's (PPHSSO) faith community leadership forums that are being held as part of its Rights, Respect, Responsibility® (RRR®) initiative. Thus far, events have taken place in two Oregon cities, drawing 144 clergy and other members from 40 diverse congregations. Additional forums are being scheduled around the state, to be provided in coalition with Planned Parenthood of the Columbia Willamette, and supported in part by a grant from PPFA's Fund for the Future.

Participants learn about the effective European approach to adolescent sexuality which has resulted in teen pregnancy rates that are dramatically lower than those in the United States. They discuss implications for Oregon, and whether it makes sense to adapt similar strategies as part of our own adolescent sexuality efforts. Thus begins a conversation about how we can do a better job of supporting our youth in developing positive, affirming sexual attitudes and behaviors... and specifically, how communities of faith play a vital role.

Rights, Respect, Responsibility® is an innovative and bold initiative that advocates proven public health strategies as a means of reducing the incidence of teen pregnancy, birth, abortion and sexually transmitted infections. With pragmatism and unyielding commitment, Europeans have shaped an approach to adolescent sexuality that has proven

remarkably effective. Working together with state and local organizations, health professionals, clergy, parents, and youth, PPHSSO launched Rights, Respect, Responsibility® to infuse teen pregnancy prevention efforts with strategies that have proven so successful in western Europe.

This initiative resonates with people. It has stirred an overwhelmingly positive response that, quite frankly, has taken us a little by surprise. There appears to be firm agreement that we've been spinning our wheels far too long around this issue, and a readiness to explore an approach that makes more sense. People are intrigued by the European story, certainly captivated by the data, and particularly enthusiastic about a pragmatic approach that utilizes the best of what research tells us about effective strategies, while at the same time honoring individual and family values that are integral to the process of sexual decision-making.

Modeled after a vision launched by Advocates for Youth, RRR® upholds the following values:

**Rights:** Young people have the right to accurate, realistic information and confidential health services;

**Respect:** Young people deserve to be respected and valued as members of the community who have much to offer;

**Responsibility:** Young people are expected to act responsibly to safeguard their health. Society has a responsibility to support youth by providing accurate information, confidential health services, and a secure stake in the future.

It is the goal of Oregon's RRR® initiative to create a climate in which these values are honored and promoted.

In the first 15 months of this campaign,

- ✓ More than 4,500 Oregonians participated in educational programs about the European approaches to adolescent sexual issues and roundtable discussions to explore implications and possibilities for our own state;

- ✓ With generous funding from the E. C. Brown Foundation, PPHSSO sponsored a team of 16 Oregonians on the 2001 Advocates for Youth European Study Tour (EST) to research effective strategies in Germany, France and the Netherlands. Five additional Oregonians will participate in the 2002 EST. This cadre of advocates is utilizing the experience to advance positive sexual health policies and practices around the state.
- ✓ Sponsored by PPHSSO, national experts in the field of adolescent sexuality have toured Oregon communities to support Rights, Respect, Responsibility<sup>®</sup> by increasing awareness and understanding around effective approaches to adolescent sexual behavior and responsibility;
- ✓ A website ([www.wecandobetter.org](http://www.wecandobetter.org)) has been developed to promote the vision of Rights, Respect, Responsibility<sup>®</sup>, organize and link supporters, and provide connections to related sites;
- ✓ The Oregon EST team produced a report of findings and recommendations to be disseminated statewide and also made available on the website;
- ✓ Faith community leadership forums have been implemented to engage congregations and support people of faith in addressing adolescent sexual health issues in positive, sensible and helpful ways.

Having learned about RRR<sup>®</sup> during a week-long series of PPHSSO-sponsored educational luncheons featuring Advocates for Youth's Barbara Huberman, coordinator of the annual European Study Tour, several ministers were eager to encourage the conversation within their own places of worship. The faith community leadership forums were developed in response to clergy who were seeking education, training and support for themselves and their congregations around the issues of adolescent sexuality.

PPHSSO called upon its two existing Clergy for Responsible Sexual Choices groups to develop, promote and implement the RRR<sup>®</sup> faith community forums. Thanks to the personal commitment of these clergy and their willingness to make personal calls to

motivate their colleagues, many congregations assembled a team of ministers, youth and adult members to participate in the events.

The leadership forum was designed to:

- educate faith communities about the needs and challenges of Oregon youth in the area of adolescent sexuality;
- examine what is and is not happening in our state to address these issues;
- share the vision of Rights, Respect, Responsibility<sup>®</sup>;
- invite and support the development of teams to work within their own congregations to nurture healthy sexuality and promote the pieces of RRR<sup>®</sup> that fit within their own system of faith.

Each team received an implementation manual with substantial supplementary materials to assist them in their efforts. PPHSSO staff is available to help with follow-up education, facilitation and/or strategic planning as congregations begin to implement their personal vision of RRR<sup>®</sup>. A number of congregations have already taken advantage of this, reinforcing their appreciation of the vital role that the faith community plays in addressing adolescent sexual health issues. As one participant declared, “Sexuality and relationships are integral parts of caring for young people within our communities of worship.”

Our affiliate is deeply gratified by the encouraging response. On the evaluation form completed by forum participants:

- 90% selected 6 or higher on a 7 point scale indicating strength of agreement that teen pregnancy should be addressed as a public health issue;
- 84% selected 6 or higher on a 7 point scale indicating level of support for the implementation of research-based policies that address teen pregnancy as a public health issue;
- 70% selected 5 or higher on a 7 point scale indicating willingness to be involved in an Oregon teen pregnancy prevention effort that is built on research-based strategies.

As our affiliate moves forward with this important work, we are inspired by Reverend Gregory Flint, pastor of the Eugene First Congregational Church who perhaps summed it up most appropriately: “The mantra of Rights, Respect, Responsibility® is that we can do better. We can, and indeed we must.”

#

Written by:

Joanne Alba – Rights, Respect, Responsibility® Coordinator / Education & Training Specialist  
Mary Gossart – Director of Education and Training