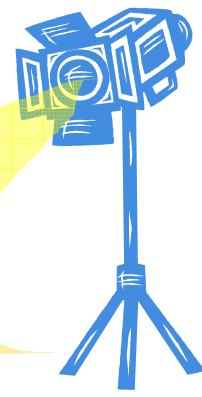


CSHC Spotlight On
Berkeley High School Health Center



Berkeley High School Health Center is the Winner of our 2008 Outstanding Reproductive Health Youth Development Program Award

Walking into the Berkeley High School Health Center (BHSHC), a visitor notices a blue outline taped on the floor in front of the reception window. “For privacy,” explains Health Center Director, Lisa Sterner. “Only one student at a time can stand in the blue area to fill out a form explaining why they’re here. They check the boxes that apply and turn in the form, so no one else will see or overhear their reason for being at the Health Center.”

Sensitivity to the needs and feelings of their teen clients is at the heart of the BHSHC, a large, modern facility built into one of the main campus buildings. Once past the waiting room, clients are directed to the first aid station, exam rooms, therapy rooms, or to the health education office. Closed doors or curtains inside the facility ensure that clients won’t see who else is in a room or what services they’re receiving. Making sure students feel safe and secure is a high priority for the clinic which takes a comprehensive approach to service delivery, integrating health education, mental health, and medical services. It also promotes youth development programs designed to increase knowledge, provide leadership opportunities and develop life skills of students. The clinic serves over 1,600 students a year during 7,000+ visits. Fifty-two percent of the 3,100-member student body use the clinic at least once a year.

Students learn about the Health Center primarily through classroom education, outreach presentations, and campus-wide events organized and presented by the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) or PASSHEN (Peers Advocating Safety

and Sexual Health Education Now). The two youth groups are responsible for going into classrooms to talk to students about everything from traffic safety and using bicycle helmets, to drunk/drugged driving, and sexual health. These student-led outreach programs have been very effective in getting the word out, and reducing any stigma associated with using the Health Center.



Members of BHSHC's Youth Advisory Board

A student will hear about the clinic in the classroom from a peer they feel they can trust. When they come in, they can always say they need a Band-Aid or Motrin, no one has to know a student came in to talk about their depression. The clinic is popular among students because of its convenient location on campus, and the fact that their privacy is protected. “I feel like I can talk to the nurse about everything and she listens. Everything stays inside her office,” states one student.

In addition to YAB and PASSHEN, other youth development activities include the Vera Casey Program that provides learning opportunities for pregnant and parenting students. There’s also Beats, Rhymes and Life, a hip-hop therapy group

working with high-risk students. BSHHC has also developed numerous support groups since research shows that teens do much better in groups with their peers. The clinic sponsors ten different mental health support groups covering everything from dealing with grief and loss to overcoming anxiety and depression to developing writing skills.

BSHHC has done an impressive job integrating services. “We really strive to look at the whole person,” explains Sterner. “We want to know what it’s like at home? Do they have friends? Are they using drugs or alcohol? Do they feel safe in their neighborhood? We look at the big picture and treat the various issues that feed into reproductive health behaviors. It’s a very holistic approach.”

A student requesting an STD test will be assessed thoroughly and could discover that her risky behaviors are actually motivated by the fact that she is living with a parent who is abusing drugs. Using a teen questionnaire which follows the HEADS (home, education, activities/work, drugs/alcohol, sexuality/suicide/safety) assessment model, a staff member will ask questions that will bring to light the stresses being experienced at home. The student would then get an immediate referral to see the clinic’s therapist. “We’ve had students come in complaining about a stomach ache or headache, and with a little digging we see that the physical symptom is just a manifestation of a deeper problem they’re facing,” says Sterner.

The Health Center has also been very effective in working with parents. If student safety is involved, the parents will be informed. Sterner also points out that the Health Center does its best to teach students how to communicate, encouraging them to speak openly and honestly with parents or guardians. Staff will ask questions, role play, and guide students through the process of having a difficult or embarrassing conversation with an adult.

Consider the case of “Karla” who wanted to see a nurse. She obtained a pregnancy test and was also referred to a therapist. When it was

determined that Karla had an ectopic pregnancy, a condition that can be life threatening, there was an urgent need to inform her parents. The therapist coached her through the process and Karla finally talked to her mother—who then became involved and supportive. As a result, Karla’s entire demeanor changed, and a frightened teen finally realized she could safely turn to others for help and support.

The Health Center has also made a point of understanding the needs of school administrators and teachers. Health Center staff makes sure students aren’t using the clinic to skip classes, and they support teachers who are facing tough situations with students in their classrooms. “We make it as easy as possible for teachers to use our resources as well as refer students to the Health Center,” asserts Sterner. All this outreach has made an enormous difference, and is one of the reasons the clinic continues to reach more students each year.

✓ BSHHC staff includes a supervising physician, an RN, nurse practitioners, licensed therapists, health educators, six mental health interns, Americorps volunteers, and administrative personnel.

✓ The Health Center’s budget is close to \$1 million and is funded by Berkeley Unified School District, the City of Berkeley’s general fund, various grants, money from Alameda County, and reimbursement revenue.

What lies ahead for the Health Center? “We’d like to figure out more effective ways of serving students during the summer. Adolescents live so much in the moment, that if they don’t see us, they forget we’re here,” notes Sterner. “I’d also love to see our youth development programs grow and see some kind of link to employment services in the future.” But for now, the BSHHC will continue to do what it’s been doing since 1991, helping students achieve more by improving student health in a teen-friendly, caring environment.

By: Aileen Olson