

Spotlight on: Belmont Health Center

Rosario Rico, School-Based Health Program Coordinator at Belmont High School in Los Angeles, knows exactly what the students who come into her clinic are going through and the challenges they are facing. Rico was a 16-year old student when she got a job as a peer leader at John Marshall High School's health center. "If it weren't for working at the health center, I would have been a teen mom," says Rico. "All my friends were having babies and I'm sure I would have followed that path too -- except that I got a job in the health center and became a peer leader." Rico received training on reproductive health education, became a certified family planning and HIV counselor, and started working with other youth in her school. A decade later she's back in southern California promoting health services for teens at the Belmont Health Center, and determined to provide opportunities for youth to learn, grow and change the course of their lives.

Last year Rico and the Belmont Health Center launched a student advisory board (SAB) with 12 students. Michael, a sophomore at Belmont and a member of the SAB says, "We come together and talk about the issues on campus, like drugs, sex and violence. These are really big problems, and we want our students to be safe and secure. We want to make a difference in our community and inspire kids to lead healthier lives." The student advisory board has helped gather data for the health center, as well as assisted with the health fair held last November. This group will also help health center staff to collect data on student attitudes and behaviors, plus provide insight into how teens are thinking and responding to health center programs and outreach. Rico reports they are still in the process of building up the SAB and finding ways to keep the students engaged and committed as the year progresses. Recruiting students to replace those who have dropped off the board is one of the challenges.

Belmont has also started a peer leaders program focused on health education in the classroom and geared for teens that want to gain leadership and speaking experience. The youth are receiving training on health topics and issues such as self-image, peer pressure,

drugs, reproductive health, and more. Once fully trained, these peer leaders will start doing classroom presentations three times per semester.



Belmont SAB at 2010 Health Fair

Jackie, a junior, got involved in the peer leader program after going to the health center for services and finding that the staff were friendly and respected her privacy. "I noticed that the clinic offered many services to students like myself and I really wanted to get involved and help other students." The goals of the peer leader group are to help other students understand their bodies and avoid teen pregnancy. "We are very excited about our peer leaders and youth advisory board," says Rico. "These teens are gaining great leadership experience and learning how to effectively teach and do presentations. This type of opportunity is what most kids have to wait for college to experience."



Belmont SAB at CSHC's LA Conference

Belmont SAB members had the opportunity to practice those newly acquired presentation skills when they recently participated in the plenary of CSHC's Los Angeles regional conference. Two SAB members addressed a large audience of conference attendees and

shared their experiences at the school health fair where they tested students on their STD knowledge, gave out prizes, and promoted healthy eating with simple recipes for tasty snacks. The youth speakers were a highlight of the CSHC conferences this year and inspired attendees with their enthusiasm and commitment to making positive changes at their schools. (The opportunity to participate in the conference was a result of Belmont's membership in CSHC's Y2Y Network. Y2Y connects students across California who are committed to school-based health care.)

The Belmont Health Center is currently operating out of a stationary mobile van located in the school parking lot. Cramped quarters have hindered the center from expanding – but not for long. Belmont will soon have one of the first new health centers built by Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The new facility, scheduled to open next year, will include 5,000 square feet of space in a “green” building that will house five exam rooms. The center will provide general health services and mental health counseling, and will also house an LAUSD immigration assistance services office.

The health center is seeking input from school leaders and parents by holding meetings to learn what they would like to see included in the new wellness center which will serve both students and local residents. Rico is intent on making sure services offered are based on community needs. “We don't want to assume we know everything about what the community is going through. We really want input that will help us shape the new wellness center.”

At Belmont, developing strong bonds with the teachers and administrators at the schools served is also a high priority. Teachers and administrators are generally quite supportive and recognize the need for health education and reproductive services for the students. “The teachers will frequently thank us for being here and tell us how much we are helping their students,” says Rico. Teachers were targeted recently when the health center offered a six-week wellness program that focused on stress, overeating, and exercise. The classes were well attended and many teachers expressed gratitude for the health center's efforts to help them deal with their own challenges. They also wanted to know when the health center would be doing this type of program for the students!

What do students and parents think of the health center? A junior at Belmont who has used the health center was recently quoted as saying, “They are really good people there. They actually help you out and are willing to work with students.” Other students aren't quite as well-informed and were surprised to hear there was a health clinic available. Outreach efforts have included fliers, presentations, and lunch time table topics focused on themes such as bullying or getting your partner tested for STDs.

Rico recently found a staff member wiping away tears because she'd just been speaking to the mother of a student who needed a sports physical. The student's father had recently died and the family had lost its health insurance. The son was going through a hard time, but still wanted to participate in sports. The mother thought she'd have to tell her son he couldn't play because she couldn't afford a doctor's visit. That's when she found out about the free services available at the school health center, including sports physicals. She came in crying to express her appreciation and to thank the staff. “This is why we're here,” says Rico. “It's nice to be acknowledged like that and to know we are providing services that make such a profound difference in a student's life.”

By Aileen Olson

Year started: 2009

Sponsor: Asian Pacific Health Care Venture

Current Facility: Stationary Mobile Unit with one exam room

New Facility Opening Late 2011: 5,000 S.F.; five exam rooms

Services: Medical services, Mental health services, Family planning, Reproductive health education, Peer leader education

Location: Belmont High School

Serves: 10 schools (including 7 high schools, 1 middle school, and 2 elementary schools)

Hours Open: 44 hours 5 days a week

Staff: Program Coordinator; Program Assistants (2); Mental Health Counselor; Outreach Worker; Nurse Practitioner; Physician

Seeking: Dietician; Dental services provider to partner with APHCV