Not long ago, a group of kids from one of Vermont’s high schools asked to interview me for a project they were working on related to dating violence. I met with these four brilliant and promising youth and I said to them, “You tell me what you know about dating violence.” For the next 90 minutes they told me everything: that dating violence is incredibly prevalent among Vermont’s teens; that teens are trapped in an untenable position between wanting and needing adults’ help and support, and risking the loss of control of their privacy, their living situation, what school they attend and their relationships if they do tell an adult what is going on; that teens’ lives in 2012 are complex and very different than those of their parents. Teens are children who live like quasi-adults and here at the Network, we have been thinking about the policies and practices which are designed to help children but which unintentionally create barriers for teens.

In this issue of the Network News, you will have the chance to learn about issues related to serving teens from some of Vermont’s top experts on serving youth. Amy Torchia, the Network’s Children’s Advocacy Coordinator, is a nationally recognized expert on serving children and youth living in violence. Bethany Pombar, our Prevention Specialist, talks about innovative approaches to working with teens to promote healthy relationships. Courtney Gabaree from HOPE Works gives us an overview of an innovative project that seeks to reduce teen sexual assault, and one of our interns from the Vermont Law School, Michelle Sanders Donnelly, provides a legal overview of the complex issues related to sheltering teen victims. Chani Waterhouse, the Network’s Associate Director of Member Program Support, tells us about the results of a needs assessment she conducted with youth in Chittenden County. Finally, we are so pleased to be able to include a poem written by an amazing youth who is a participant in SafeArt, a terrific organization that offers teen victims healing and hope.

For teens living with violence, life’s complexity increases exponentially. We anticipate that our exploration of the issues, policies and practices that increase barriers for teens who seek help will result in better outcomes for Vermont’s teens and their families.
A Foot in Both Worlds:
Effective Advocacy with Youth

By Amy Torchia

Ah, Youth! The energy and agility with which our brains and hearts moved—managing slippery family, school and social lives; the excitement and aches of being on the precipice of adulthood, of realizing the first steps of independence, of deep intimate friendships and tender romances. Recall the thrill of every new experience, the mastery of some of them and the throbbing collapse of others. And, what about the disorientation that came with having one foot in the adult world and one left in childhood? Remember the steady expectations to behave as adults but with no guarantee of the equivalent respect or afforded rights. It was a tedious act to balance developing individualities and autonomy with an invariable dependence on adults for our physical and emotional wellbeing. This is the common experience of most youth. A time in life that many adults look back at and say, “It was fun, but, I never want to do that again!”

For youth who are victims of dating or sexual violence, navigating these developmental tasks and milestones are often more confusing and even debilitating. Think about this scenario: A young woman of sixteen is at a party where her boyfriend forced her into sexual activity to which she did not consent. Sexual assault. To complicate matters, she is at the party without her parents’ permission with a boyfriend who she isn’t allowed to be dating. It is the next morning and she can’t get out of bed. She wants to talk to someone. Her best friend doesn’t like him because she thinks he keeps her from her friends—so, she won’t call her. She learned of the local advocacy program at a school presentation and knows the number to call. But, she doesn’t know if calling will mean her parents finding out or a call to DCF. Chances are—her parents would do something legally to make him stay away from her even though she doesn’t want that. They might force her to go to the hospital for an exam which might lead to a police investigation. That makes her stomach hurt. In her experience, being a teen means that her information is up for grabs. She has few if any exclusive decision making rights once her story is out. It is usually her parents or, in this case, could be a state system that will make decisions about her life and her safety.

Yet, how can a 16 year old manage this experience without support? At the very least, she may be physically hurt or pregnant. Many young people will reach out to friends first. Her friends may be knowledgeable, not blame her, and help lead her to more support. They may not. Lots of teens have parents with whom they can be honest about a situation like this, who will not judge, and who will respect her need to have some control over her path and the outcomes. Lots don’t. The fact is, there are many youth who will not talk about this and not reach out to anyone. And, for many of them, it is because of this precarious position of being a teen—a person in between, unsure about how much power they have to make their own decisions, about how much privacy they are allowed, about how much the support available will mean anything to them— that will keep them from reaching out.

Nationally, approximately one in five female high school students reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner.\(^1\) \(44\%\) of sexual assault and rape victims are under the age of 18.\(^2\) Retrospective research indicates that as many as one in four girls and one in six boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18.\(^3\) Here at home through the 2011 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 7% of Vermont 9-12th graders reported that they were hit, slapped, or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend during the past year. And, 6% of them reported having ever been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.\(^4\)

Clearly, there are youth in Vermont who are struggling with the issues of dating and sexual violence. It is our job as domestic and sexual violence advocates, youth serving agencies, parents, teachers, friends, etc. to position ourselves astride the worlds in which teens live. We are charged with providing young survivors with responses that respect their privacy and allow for as much self-determination as possible while being transparent about our mandates and acknowledging that teens do not have the same rights or decision making power as adults. In order to provide effective support, we must be aware of our boundaries, pay close attention to survivor safety and offender accountability as it relates to teens, and make sure our responses are relevant to youth in Vermont.

continued on page 3
A Foot in Both Worlds
continued from page 2

Informed Communications
Confidentiality is the act of keeping communications private and has many applications and restrictions that vary across professions. Victims of all ages have the right to know the limits of a given professional’s confidentiality. Teens have the right to know the intentions of whoever is listening to their story (including friends and family members). No matter the role, it is best practice for adults to understand their confidentiality limitations and intentions and articulate them to youth before getting too involved. This includes mandated reporting of child abuse and internal policies and practices regarding information sharing to parents, guardians and others. Although there is some concern that teens will be discouraged from seeking help if they are informed about reporting obligations, anecdotal evidence suggest that teens are likely to disclose even after hearing such disclaimers and appreciate knowing what will happen with the information they share. In the domestic and sexual violence advocacy world, we strive to hold the confidentiality of youth victims as paramount and to allow them as much decision making authority over their information as possible.

Safety, Support and Accountability
Youth safety is the most important consideration for any adult who may be hearing about a situation of dating or sexual violence. Asking a few questions about the youth’s immediate safety and network of support, the perpetrator’s location and behavior, and her or his safety concerns can lead to an important conversation about safety and safety planning. As soon as possible, youth victims should be offered the contact information for their local Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence Member Program. Network program advocates are knowledgeable about the legal and support options available for teens as well as safety planning.

Central to any victim advocacy work is the principle that victims are not to blame for what happened to them. For the young girl in our scenario, there is nothing about her that made the sexual assault her fault. It doesn’t matter that she was at a party and with a boy without her parents’ permission. It wouldn’t have been her fault if she had been drinking or drunk. The acts of sexual and domestic violence are solely the responsibility of the perpetrator. Consequently, in our interactions with youth, it is critical that we make clear to all youth where the responsibility lies. Additionally, because many adults have the opportunity of interacting with both survivors and youth who offend, we have abundant opportunities to hold perpetrators accountable for their behavior. Through clear program policies, staff training, and referral resources — schools, youth services, mental health and after school programs can create environments where youth who commit dating and sexual violence are held responsible and survivors are supported.

Meeting Youth Where They Are
Developmentally
When it comes to the issues of dating and sexual violence, the experience of youth is unique simply because they are still developing. Not only does this mean that the abuse itself can impact their development, it also means that our responses to teens are critical to their growth. If our responses are helpful — for both young survivors and offenders — we can assume that we will have a positive influence on how they incorporate their experiences into their lives.

Just Beneath the Skin
— 17 year old girl
You look and see a happy girl surrounded by friends and content with the world, but the things you don’t know, that’s where it begins, because the memories that haunt her lurk just beneath the skin.

The scars are nonexistent except inside where no one can see them, where she can hide.

Smiling and laughing, you’d think nothing awry because she refuses to let herself cry.

She straightens her shoulders and sets her chin, determined not to let it get to her again.

The words that cut her soul like knives - seems as though they were in a different life, but some things trigger memories of her past.

She is convinced that the trauma will not last.

So, next time she shies away from random things or recoils from the harshness another voice brings, just remember that the things you don’t know is where it all begins, because the memories that haunt her lurk just beneath the skin.

A Foot in Both Worlds
continued from page 3

their identities as adults.

How teens process and go about managing these situa-
tions is also influenced by where they are in their develop-
ment. We cannot expect teens to approach us the way that
adults do. Our responses have to consider that teens are
developmentally navigating and shifting identities, values,
gender, sexuality, power and control, and intimate relation-
ships. It is a much more fluid landscape than for adults.

Culturally

The more we understand the culture in which youth live,
the better our responses will be. We must constantly ask
ourselves questions in order to not become complacent.
How do we make sure our outreach is keeping up with
changing technology and social networking? What do we
have to learn to understand how these technologies affect
youth relationships and communication? How do we make
sure that our outreach material and services are sensitive
to the realities of sexual exploration, sexual orientation and
gender identity? Knowing that youth are unlikely to call a
hotline or help-lines, what internet resources can we utilize
to create new forums for youth to access support? Knowing
that youth are most likely to talk to their friends about their
concerns, what information and training can we provide to
all youth to be peer advocates and good bystanders?

Supporting youth through dating and sexual violence
presents us with unique challenges. It is not enough to
insert them into support structures designed for adult
victims. Providing effective advocacy requires us to be
knowledgeable about both the adult and teen worlds. We
are challenged to be transparent in our communication
with youth as well as offer information, support and services
that are respectful and sensitive. If we do this well, we will
ultimately create the bridges that will allow youth to access
meaningful support and safety.

1 Silverman et al; “Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and
Associated Substance Use Unhealthy Weight Control”, “Sexual Risk
Behavior, Pregnancy and Suicidality”: Journal of the AMA, Vol 286
(No. 5, 2001)
2 U.S. DOJ 2004 National Crime Victimization Survey
3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adverse Childhood
Experiences Study: Data and Statistics. Atlanta, GA: Centers for
Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace/prevalence.htm
gov/research/yrbs/2011/index.aspx
5 National Center for Victims of Crime. Chart a Course: Policies That
Affect Victims Services for Teens (2008)

The Vermont Network was recently awarded the
Design & Accessibility Award from the Governor’s
Committee on the Employment of People with
Disabilities.

Working closely with the owner and contractor, the
Network advocated to ensure that renovations made
to an 1800s residence for our new office space included
a designated parking area, an access ramp, threshold
removal, accessible office and meeting space and an ADA
compliant bathroom.

In the words of nominator Sarah Launderville of the
Vermont Center for Independent Living, Karen and the
Network “demonstrated a strong commitment to create
a welcoming and accessible environment for employees,
community partners, and the public they serve.”

We would like to thank the Governor’s Committee on the
Employment of People with Disabilities for this award and
Sarah Launderville of VCIL for nominating us.

Vermont Network Receives Award
Design & Accessibility Award Given to the Vermont Network

Chani Waterhouse (left) accepting the Design & Accessibility Award
on behalf of Karen Tronsgard-Scott and the VT Network, with Susan
Wehry (right), Commissioner of the VT Department of Disabilities,
Aging and Independent Living representing the Governor’s
Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities.
Building Capacity for Advocacy with Youth: A Vermont Story

In the fall of 2010 Chittenden County’s Spectrum Youth and Family Services and HOPE Works were awarded a grant to enhance responses to youth who experience sexual or dating violence or stalking. With grant partners (Outright VT, the Lund Family Center and Women Helping Battered Women), the organizations asked the VT Network and the Chittenden County Domestic & Sexual Violence Task Force to facilitate the planning phase of the grant and conduct a Strengths & Needs Assessment in their community.

The assessment was completed in the spring of 2011. That summer the grant partners analyzed the assessment findings and developed their plan to work together to enhance responses to youth survivors in Chittenden County. Chani Waterhouse writes about what was learned through the Needs Assessment, and Courtney Gabaree describes some of the initiatives undertaken at HOPE Works during the first year of implementation.

Toward Youth-Friendly and Violence-Informed Services for Youth: Assessing Opportunities in Chittenden County

by Chani Waterhouse, Associate Director of Member Program Support

"Think to guys, consent is very different," explained the young woman. It was March of 2011, and I was sitting in a room with a group of young women who had agreed to participate in a focus group. They were talking about “consent” – how they understood it, and what it meant to male friends and partners. She went on: “I’ve been afraid to say no – but anything but a straight-out ‘No – get away from me’ they take as ‘Yeah, I can do it.’”

Through this and other focus groups, and through surveys, we heard from youth who were brimming with feedback for us. We wanted to find out what they thought about sexual and dating violence and stalking, and what it was like for youth survivors to look for help. Additionally, staff at grant partner organizations, and other allied professionals, participated in focus groups and interviews, and also completed surveys.

These activities yielded lots of rich information about strengths and needs in Chittenden County’s organizational responses to youth survivors of sexual and dating violence.

An Ever-Evolving Approach to Service Provision: Serving Youth

by Courtney Gabaree, HOPE Works Youth Advocate

It seems as if every day I am asked what a typical day looks like as the Youth Advocate at HOPE Works. I’m sure many can relate to being a bit perplexed answering this question. No one day in the advocacy world, especially while serving youth, is like the previous one. I feel very lucky that my position combines both direct service and program planning. Not only am I able to work directly with (and learn directly from) youth, but I also have the privilege of creating programming to better serve young survivors who are at increased risk for victimization from sexual and dating violence. Two of these new programs for youth are highlighted in this article.

My position is funded through a grant from the Office on Violence Against Women: Services to Advocate for and Respond to Youth Grant. This multi-year grant allows HOPE Works to partner with Spectrum Youth and Family Services, the Lund Family Center, Outright Vermont, and Women Helping Battered Women (WHBW) in order to strengthen services in Chittenden County available to youth who...
Toward Youth-Friendly and Violence-Informed Services for Youth
continued from page 5

and stalking.

Chittenden County may be unique in Vermont in the number and size of organizations offering services and advocacy with youth or with survivors of sexual and domestic violence and stalking. Yet many experiences of Chittenden County youth are shared by youth in other parts of the state, even in more rural areas. We would be likely to hear similar stories from youth and service providers throughout Vermont.

What we learned

Youth involved with the grant partner organizations were likely to have multiple and complex experiences of sexual or dating violence or stalking. 77% of youth who were identified by grant partner organizations to complete the survey reported having experienced sexual or dating violence or stalking. 100% of grant partner organization staff completing surveys reported working with youth they knew to have experienced sexual or dating violence or stalking.

Youth are unlikely to go to service providers first when they want to talk about violence in their lives. It was unclear from the surveys how likely youth are to disclose to service providers at any point.

Domestic and sexual violence advocacy organizations, and youth-serving organizations, bring diverse and complementary strengths and resources to the table. However, we found that expertise was often more or less “silo-ed” – within organizations, within programs, and with individuals. This means that substantial opportunities exist to leverage existing expertise through sharing cross-training, collaboration and mentoring.

Staff at the different organizations shared a deep commitment to help youth with sexual and dating violence and stalking issues, and a common feeling that “we could do better” on this issue.

Responses designed specifically to meet the complex needs of youth survivors are needed. Youth told us they needed services that offer them lots of options, maximize autonomy and support, and respond to the complex realities of their lives, while being accessible, responsive, confidential, culturally competent and violence-informed.

Youth spoke in glowing terms about workers who listened without judging, offered options without pushing particular choices, and stuck with them over time. Youth particularly valued the opportunity to work with an older person who shared or seemed to really “get” their experiences. At the same time, youth reported wanting opportunities to connect with other survivors their age.

Just as many practices within youth-serving organizations may not fully address the needs of youth survivors, practices within D&SV advocacy organizations may not fully address the needs of youth. Substantial opportunities existed for all grant partner organizations to enhance and institutionalize responses to youth survivors through collaboration and organizational change.

Collaboration is key to accomplishing goals. Existing collaborative work between grant partners was limited and uneven, and tended to focus on outreach, education and referrals. Collaboration and coordination to enhance direct services was more limited and sometimes very challenging. We heard from staff that constructive collaboration around direct services would significantly enhance organizational responses to youth survivors.

Staff emphasized that collaboration needed to be based on institutional commitments rather than dependent on individuals who may come and go.

Collaboration requires exploring differences in perspective, paradigm and approach. Addressing differences directly creates opportunities to deepen mutual understanding and respect, as well as identify or develop shared understandings around core values.

The five organizations participating in this collaboration have the opportunity to work together in new ways and create fundamental changes in each organization to benefit youth survivors. This type of partnership can serve as a model for other communities taking on the commitment to create more holistic and responsive services for youth survivors of violence and abuse.

“Other organizations may get that we are confidential, but they don’t necessarily understand why, or value it.”
— Partner Organization Staff
An Ever-Evolving Approach to Service Provision

continued from page 5

have experienced sexual violence, dating violence, and/or stalking. A particular focus is given to pregnant and/or parenting youth, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth who identify as LGBTQ.

HOPE Works has been lucky enough to collaborate with WHBW to provide knowledgeable services to youth, including creating and delivering a youth support group available at Spectrum’s youth drop in location. The support group was developed with the intention of making it accessible to individuals who identify as survivors and to those who identify as allies. We wanted to ensure that even if a youth wasn’t yet ready to identify as a survivor that they could still receive important support services. And of course the more allies that our movements have, the better off we will be!

It was a wonderful learning experience—forcing us to think outside of the box to find unique ways to offer support to youth who access Spectrum services, mostly homeless, at-risk for homelessness, and precariously-housed youth. The youth we served—and continue to serve—encouraged us to tweak our concept of support groups as a whole: it was essential to provide services to youth who are experiencing homelessness where they are at—literally and figuratively.

For homeless youth, addressing basic needs—in this case a warm meal eaten in a safe environment—alongside the work of addressing past and continual sexual and domestic violence on the street was essential. Many were not yet in a place to directly process the violence they had experienced. It was a wonderful fit to hold our support group at Spectrum’s Drop-In Center, during the times when the agency provides free lunch and dinner. The idea of playing “Jeopardy” during specific mealtimes each month was a hit. Within each meal and game, we addressed issues such as triggers, wellness and self-care, human trafficking and survival sex, consent, and dating and sexual violence. We also used the space to incorporate information about youth and advocacy services offered.

Our second new service (available to everyone in Chittenden County, but accessed primarily by youth and college students) is HOPE Works’ new chat line. In the world of texting, especially among youth, HOPE Works felt strongly that we needed to adapt to the new ways survivors seek confidential resources. This online support option functions in many ways as HOPE Works’ phone-based hotline, with some notable differences. First, the chat line is web-based and functions like an Instant Message conversation. Second, our chat line is not a 24/7 resource. A big thank you to national technical assistance providers at the Office of Violence Against Women and the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) for working with us for months to ensure both our software and internal response protocols were designed to keep survivors and their online conversations safe and private on the internet.

In the first month we provided emotional support, options counseling, and referrals to three new survivors. We were excited—three! Now, six months later, we get up to five survivors a day reaching out to us through our chat line. We have hopes to expand the hours of the chat feature of our website—currently only available two to five pm, Monday through Thursday—so that we can accommodate more survivors’ schedules. Our goal is by the fall to have evening hours for students to access our online support and get the help and information they need.

As we continue to expand and enhance our services for youth, we pay special attention to listening to and learning from youth survivors themselves. As HOPE Works’ Youth Advocate, I have the privilege and honor to facilitate our Youth Voices work group. This workgroup is comprised of youth leaders in our community, some survivors and some clients or youth volunteers of Spectrum Youth and Family Services, Outright Vermont, and the Lund Family Center, and staff representatives from youth-focused agencies in Chittenden County. The purpose of the group is to continually receive a youth perspective of our programming efforts—because youth deserve to be heard (and served).

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Yes! Please send the Network News to:

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State ___________ Zip ______________
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Mail/E-mail to: VNADSV, P.O. Box 405, Montpelier, VT 05601 or library@vtnetwork.org
The Need for Youth-based Prevention

by Bethany Pombar,
Prevention Specialist

I believe the children are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside…

— The Greatest Love of All, written by Michael Masser and Linda Creed, made popular by Whitney Houston

It was 1986 when I was nine years old and fell in love with this song. With Whitney Houston’s recent tragic passing, it has been circulating on the airwaves again and I find my love for these lyrics has not waned. Today I find new applications for the inspiration. For me, the song succinctly summarizes our current best practice approach to prevention of domestic and sexual violence.

For years we have focused our prevention efforts on youth through education in schools and we have been right to do so. Youth ARE the future, and they are very impressionable in the present. Unfortunately, many of the messages that surround kids, primarily coming from media, are not very positive or supportive of healthy relationships. There are too many messages that convey that young men need to be aggressive, violent and callous to the feelings of others and young women’s path to empowerment, notoriety and success is through their sexualization.

It would be all too easy for adults to throw our hands up and say “There is too much noise for us to make a dent.” We shouldn’t underestimate our import in youths’ lives. They ARE listening to us when we are taking the time to connect about things that are important to them. Developmentally, relationships are one of the MOST important things to them, whether dating, friend or family relations. Our kids want to hear from us, even if they don’t exactly act like it sometimes, and we have a responsibility to teach them well because many of them are already too familiar with the reality.

The Reality

• 44% of forcible sexual assault and rape victims are under the age of 18.

Teens are the highest risk age group for experiencing intimate violence and much is perpetrated by their peers in the school setting; often without the incidents being named sexual or dating violence because some forms are so subtle, normalized and pervasive that we don’t think about the behaviors as violence. However the impacts are manifesting themselves among our youth.

According to the 2011 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), which surveys middle and high school youth, both being a bully and being victimized by bullies have been increasingly recognized as health problems for youth because of their association with a range of problems, including poor psychological adjustment, poor academic achievement and violent behavior.

In 2011, 17% of students reported being bullied in the past 30 days. The YRBS didn’t ask about harassment but many students aren’t clear about the difference between bullying and harassment, so it is hard to tell how much of this student reported bullying behavior was actually sexual harassment of some sort.

• Harassment is based on actual or perceived student or student’s family members’ membership in a protected category: Race, creed, color, national origin, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, disability or gender identity.

Many forms of harassment are types of sexual violence. Anything based on an individual’s sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation falls into this category and is on a continuum that supports more aggressive forms of violence like rape and physical abuse. While
some of these behaviors might not rise to the level of criminal behavior, perpetrators should still be held accountable and victims supported. Harassment is more than “kids being kids.”

In a recent national survey, 48% of high school students reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment in the last year. Only 9% reported the harassment incidents to authority figures. ³ 92% of those who self reported sexually harassing others also reported being victims of harassment.⁴

Teen dating violence is also prevalent among youth. 7% of Vermont students reported being hit, slapped, or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year.⁵

Nationally, 29% of the young women surveyed who had ever been in a relationship said they had been pressured to have sex or to engage in sexual activity they did not want.⁶

What We Are Doing

Network member programs have been supporting youth victims all along. Advocates have also worked with schools to help define school responses. We have to find ways for communities to hold youth accountable while still allowing space for them to grow and learn so offending youth do not become entrenched in harmful behaviors. By sending clear messages and calling out inappropriate acts, we decrease cultural silence around violence and create safer environments.

It is helpful to think of violence perpetration existing along a continuum: at one end is rape, physical intimate partner (dating) violence and murder, and at the other end would be sexist and homophobic jokes or crass comments about a girl’s body made to a peer. While the need to hold someone accountable who has reached the physically violent end of the continuum is obvious, we also need to look at points before that where there are places for redirection, intervention and support. This is the space for primary prevention, where adults fulfill our responsibility to help youth build positive and supportive relationships.

By embracing primary prevention, we can shift away from risk reduction to health promotion. We get to put a positive spin on this heavy topic and we find that youth respond much better and find it more accessible. We get to talk about what supportive relationships look like and practice skills to help get there. We get to paint the picture of the future we want and set the prey/predator narrative of risk reduction education aside, opting to “show them all the beauty they possess inside” instead.

Prevention educators have expanded our repertoire to include talking about what components need to be in place for real consent to be possible in sexual relationships. How to compassionately accept a refusal of amorous advances, making it safe to say “no”, and the impacts of gender norms, oppression and privilege on our lives. We look at the behaviors on the violence continuum and what role peers can have in addressing those behaviors before they escalate, thus creating safe and practiced avenues for bystanders to step up and create a culture of accountability.

In addition to the information that we provide youth around these topics, we need to back it up with information for their parents, teachers, coaches and other influential people in youth lives so that we are all giving clear and consistent messages. We do this through letters and worksheets sent home with kids, or meetings and workshops for parents. Repetitive messaging will help youth hear us better through the clutter of other media messages. To really be effective, we have to be supporting all adults in claiming their role as relationship educators. Just as we teach our kids to tie their shoes or wash their hands, we need to dive into this stuff with them too.

These efforts directed at youth are a vital step towards real cultural transformation. When we do our part and make space for and prioritize primary prevention, we can let youth lead the way to a brighter, safer, and more equitable future where there will be less need for our crisis support services.

3 AAUW, Crossing the Lines 2011, http://www.aauw.org/learn/research/crossingtheline.cfm
4 ibid
Homeless Youth

By Michelle Sanders Donnelly, Legal Intern

Homelessness is a problem for youth in Vermont. The 2011 VT Office of Economic Opportunity One Night Shelter Count found that 29.5% of emergency shelter inhabitants were children. Many of the homeless youth in the state are “hidden homeless.” The one night count does not reach children who are living in cars, motels, or doubling-up with other families.

The causes of youth homelessness are varied. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center compiled a fact-sheet about youth homelessness that illustrates the reasons youth leave their homes. Some minors leave home on their own to flee abuse; 61% of homeless girls and 19% of homeless boys reported sexual abuse as the reason for leaving home. Others are kicked out or forced to flee their homes as a result of their sexual orientation. LGBTQ youth make up 35 to 50% of all homeless youth in the United States. Domestic violence is another significant cause of youth homelessness.

When domestic violence victims with young children attempt to flee their abuser, they often have few resources and are at high risk of ending up homeless. Many victims who flee to a domestic violence shelter bring their children. In 2011, Member Programs of the Vermont Network served 1,212 children.

Whatever the situation or reason for youth homelessness in Vermont, the effects on homeless children are profound. Homelessness increases the risk of experiencing sexual violence. A survey by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center found that homeless victims of sexual violence often end up in unsafe living conditions, which makes them more vulnerable to future violence. The study also found that 58% of respondents reported instances of sexual assault by landlords, and that youth who are couch surfing are vulnerable to sexual abuse from their hosts.

May Vermont shelters take in unaccompanied minors?

Programs of the VT Network endeavor to give youth experiencing violence the support they need. They offer services and support to youth experiencing sexual violence in dating relationships, those witnessing domestic violence in their homes, and youth staying in the program shelter.

Some shelters in Vermont are allowed to take in unaccompanied minors because they are licensed by the state as a “designated youth shelter” 33 V.S.A. §5304. A designated shelter may take in an unaccompanied minor when a law enforcement officer brings the minor to the shelter. The minor may stay at the designated shelter for a period not to exceed seven days.

In the case where the program is not a designated shelter, the law does not allow a program to shelter an unaccompanied minor. A person commits the crime of unlawfully sheltering or aiding a runaway child if the person:

1. Knowingly shelters a runaway child;
2. Intentionally aids, helps or assists a child to become a runaway child;
3. Knowingly takes, entices or harbors a runaway child, with the intent of committing a criminal act involving the child or with the intent of enticing or forcing the child to commit a criminal act.

This law clearly states that unless the program is a designated shelter in the state, it cannot offer shelter to an unaccompanied youth. Punishment for violating this statute (for a first offense) is imprisonment for not more than 30 days or a fine not to exceed $500. There have not been any prosecutions under this law. 13 V.S.A. §1311.

However, the law includes an express defense to prosecution under the statute if the defendant “acted reasonably and in good faith to protect the child from imminent physical, mental, or emotional harm.” This affirmative defense offers some protection to shelters that take in an unaccompanied minor. There is very little case law on this topic making it difficult to predict what a court would deem to be reasonable actions by a person assisting a runaway youth.

So, what happens when a teenage girl shows up on the doorstep of one of the Network Programs? Must they turn her away?

This question is on the minds of Network Programs as they begin to develop best practices to assist unaccompanied youth. Network Programs are not designated shelters and must act carefully to address the needs of unaccompanied youth as well as stay within the bounds of the law. Safety is the top priority for all Network Programs.
Program conversations concentrate on how to help unaccompanied youth create safety plans and access the services they need. The Network helps these programs develop protocols by offering technical assistance on legal issues.

One way that Network Programs can provide services to homeless youth is through the use of the McKinney-Vento Act.

**Homeless Youth and Access to Education: The McKinney-Vento Act**

Children who experience homelessness are more likely to fall behind in their education. A study at the University of Vermont concluded that children who move around a lot perform three to ten percentile lower than their more stable, housed peers.

Advocates serve youth and their families every year by helping children access education. In addition to helping homeless youth keep up with their academics, continuing to attend school can provide them with a social support network and a sense of normalcy during a turbulent period. Homeless youth can stay connected with their friend networks, which can be invaluable during a stressful time in the child’s life.

The McKinney Vento Act is a federal law that grants homeless youth the right to continue their education. The McKinney-Vento Act ("the Act"), requires states to have a plan in place to assist homeless youth to continue to have access to education for the duration of their homelessness.

The Act defines a homeless person as an “individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” Homelessness includes doubling-up with another family, staying in a hotel, or residing in a shelter. It also includes children who are residing in domestic violence shelters with a parent.

Advocates can help homeless students continue their education by informing them of their rights and helping them get in touch with the local McKinney Vento liaison.

The local education liaisons will assist a homeless youth to continue their education during the duration of their homelessness. A list of all the liaisons in Vermont is available at: [http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_homeless.html](http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_homeless.html).

The Act guarantees homeless youth the right to continue their education in their hometown, even if homelessness has forced them to move away from the school district. The Act also requires that transportation to and from school be provided, if requested by the parent or guardian, even if the homeless student currently resides in a different school district.

If a youth experiencing homelessness wishes to enroll in school in the district where he or she is currently residing, the Act ensures enrollment in any public school other students in the district would be eligible to attend. The Act requires that public schools accept the enrollment of homeless youth, even if the child does not have the appropriate paperwork normally required to enroll in the school.

VT Network Member Programs are working hard to address the needs of homeless youth and unaccompanied minors in Vermont. Concentrating on the specific needs of children and teens, the programs are striving to provide service to this underserved community.

Throughout Vermont, there is a raised awareness about the rights of homeless youth and the ability of programs to serve them. Service providers in Vermont communities can continue to work with other providers in their area to give hope to our homeless youth.
Addison County & town of Rochester
WomenSafe
P.O. Box 67, Middlebury, VT 05753
Hotline: (802) 388.4205 or 1.800.388.4205

Bennington County
PAVE*
P.O. Box 227, Bennington, VT 05201
Hotline: (802) 442.2111

Caledonia, Orleans & Essex Counties
The Advocacy Program at Umbrella*
1222 Main St. #301, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819
Hotline: (802) 748.8645

The Advocacy Program at Umbrella
93 E. Main Street #1, Newport, VT 05855
Hotline: (802) 334.0148

Caledonia County (Hardwick area)
AWARE
P.O. Box 307, Hardwick, VT 05843
Hotline: (802) 472.6463

Chittenden County
HOPE Works
P.O. Box 92, Burlington, VT 05402
Hotline: (802) 863.1236

Women Helping Battered Women*
P.O. Box 1535, Burlington, VT 05402
Hotline: (802) 658.1996 (also TTY#)

Franklin & Grand Isle Counties
Voices Against Violence*
P.O. Box 72, St. Albans, VT 05478
Hotline: (802) 524.6575

Lamoille County
Clara Howard Nichols Center*
P.O. Box 517, Morrisville, VT 05661
Hotline: (802) 888.5256

Orange & NE Windsor Counties
Safeline
P.O. Box 368, Chelsea, VT 05038
Hotline: 1.800.639.7233

Rutland County
Rutland County Women’s NW & Shelter*
P.O. Box 313, Rutland, VT 05701
Hotline: (802) 775.3232

Washington County
Circle*
P.O. Box 652, Barre, VT 05641
Hotline: 1.877.543.9498

Sexual Assault Crisis Team*
4 Cottage Street, Barre, VT 05641
Hotline: (802) 479.5577

Windham County
Women’s Freedom Center*
P.O. Box 933, Brattleboro, VT 05302
Hotline: (802) 254.6954 or 1.800.773.0689

Windsor County (NE)
WISE*
38 Bank Street, Lebanon, NH 03766
Hotline: (603) 448.5525 or 1.866.348.WISE

Windsor County (southern parts)
New Beginnings
23 Pleasant St., Springfield, VT 05156
Hotline: (802) 885.2050 or (802) 674.6700

Statewide Hotlines:
Domestic Violence: 1-800-228-7395
Sexual Violence: 1-800-489-7273

* Indicates Shelter

This publication is available in alternate format.