

For Immediate Release

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START STRONG LOS ANGELES LAUNCHES COMMUNITYWIDE PUBLIC HEALTH EFFORT TO STOP TEEN DATING ABUSE

Peace Over Violence and community partners to promote healthy relationships through new national Start Strong initiative

LOS ANGELES (Date)—Beginning this week, Peace Over Violence is launching Start Strong Los Angeles, part of the largest national initiative aimed at 11-to 14- year-olds to promote safe and healthy relationships and prevent teen dating violence and abuse. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Blue Shield of California Foundation* are investing \$18 million in 11 communities across the country to identify and evaluate the most promising pathways to stop dating violence and abuse before it starts.

L.A.-based Peace Over Violence was chosen as one of 11 community organizations nationwide to receive a \$1 million grant from Blue Shield of California Foundation as part of Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships. "Start Strong Los Angeles will rally the entire community, including teens, parents, caregivers, educators, and community leaders to build environments that support healthy relationships and ensure violence and abuse are never tolerated," said Patti Giggans, executive director of Peace Over Violence.

(* Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is funding ten sites around the country and Blue Shield of California Foundation is funding one site in California.)

Statistics show:

- One in three teens reports knowing a friend or peer who has been hit, punched, kicked, slapped or physically hurt by a partner.
- 45 percent of girls know a friend or peer who has been pressured into having either intercourse or oral sex.

"There is a clear need for educational programs and community engagement to reinforce positive teen relationships," Giggans added.

Together with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Berendo Middle School, Virgil Middle School, the Institute for Multimedia Literacy and El Centro Del Pueblo, Peace Over Violence has developed a comprehensive community plan for this four-year initiative to address the community's needs.

"LAUSD is committed to providing a safe school campus to all students," said Ramon Cortines, Superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, pledging his support for the initiative. "Healthy relationships are a crucial part of school engagement and academic achievement. "

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The Start Strong Los Angeles program will concentrate in and around Berendo and Virgil middle schools and aims to impact students and their families, 85 percent of whom can be defined as very-low income and chronically exposed to violence. “Every member of our community deserves a respectful and healthy relationship,” said Abigail Sims, project director of Start Strong Los Angeles at Peace Over Violence. “This project will support youth, parents, caregivers, educators, and community members in their efforts to ensure that all relationships are healthy and safe.”

The initiative will include curricula and peer education to engage students in school and community settings, education for parents and caregivers and community wide efforts to engage all stakeholders in building healthy teen relationships. Youth will provide leadership to the project by participating in the development of the program through focus groups, planning sessions and retreats to design new approaches to problems they have identified. The direct involvement from older students from local high schools, most of who are engaged in the school’s TDV programs, will engage older youth as role models, mentors, and educators.

“We want to empower young people to make positive choices about their relationships,” said Blue Shield of California Foundation President and CEO Crystal Hayling. “Start Strong works with youth to provide healthy alternatives to the Chris Brown/Rihanna scenario and others like it. At school, online, at home or just hanging out, youth engagement in programs like this is the antidote to teen dating violence.”

A new media component will be led by USC’s Institute for Multimedia Literacy and will train community teens to generate and utilize social marketing strategies. The media campaign will use social networking, viral dissemination and digital storytelling to promote healthy youth relationships.

“Peace Over Violence launches the program this week at Berendo Middle School,” Sims said. Parent, teacher, and student trainings will be performed all throughout “Violence Prevention Week” at Berendo. On Friday June 19, “Start Strong Healthy Relationship Day” will feature a parent kick-off breakfast and extensive healthy teen relationship education in up to fifteen classrooms by teams from Peace Over Violence.

“Berendo is a fully committed partner in the efforts to promote healthy youth relationships,” said Robert Bilovsky, principal. “We are very excited to be involved in the Start Strong Los Angeles initiative.”

Through the Start Strong grant provided by Blue Shield of California Foundation, Peace Over Violence is working with the Family Violence Prevention Fund to implement the Start Strong model in Los Angeles. Start Strong combines and expands on innovative strategies in education, policy change, community outreach and social marketing campaigns to empower local teens to develop healthier relationships.

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About Peace Over Violence

Formerly the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women, Peace Over Violence is a social service agency dedicated to building healthy relationships, families and communities free from sexual, domestic and interpersonal violence. For more information, visit www.peaceoverviolence.org.

About Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, we work with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 35 years we've brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those we serve. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, we expect to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information visit www.rwjf.org.

About Blue Shield of California Foundation

Blue Shield of California Foundation, one of the largest healthcare grantmaking organizations in California, has committed a total of \$24.4 million since 2002 to ending domestic violence in the state. For more information, please visit the Web site at www.blueshieldcafoundation.org. The Foundation was formed by Blue Shield of California, a not-for-profit health plan with more than 3.4 million members, 4,700 employees at 20 offices throughout California. For more information about the company, please visit www.blueshieldca.com.