Prevention Through Liberation: Dismantling oppression and promoting sexual and relational health in Oregon

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

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How do we move beyond naming oppression and its effects on sexual and domestic violence to taking action toward liberation? The Oregon Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence has spent time identifying how oppression against and within communities of color and other marginalized communities contributes to sexual and domestic violence. Further, they are exploring how to cultivate anti-oppressive practices that promote violence prevention. The coalition has developed a framework and project called "Prevention through Liberation" and is funding communities such as Proyecto UNICA to advance the work.

DISMANTLING OPPRESSION AND PROMOTING SEXUAL AND RELATIONAL HEALTH: THE THEORY AND FRAMEWORK

For the Oregon coalition, Prevention through Liberation is about setting people and societies free through stopping sexual and domestic violence and promoting sexual and relational health. Recognizing that oppression is at the root of violence, the coalition sees liberation from oppression as central for violence prevention. Oppression proliferates in many forms such as racism, sexism, transphobia and ableism. These disproportionately impact marginalized groups creating harmful conditions that discourage healthy norms and are conducive to harmful power dynamics and violence. For example, imperialism exploited aboriginal communities by stealing land, abusing power, and then divesting in them, followed by blaming those same communities for their poor conditions. A very relevant current-day example across this US is gentrification where communities of color and people with lower income levels are being pushed out of their homes and displaced to neighborhoods with poorer living conditions.

The coalition suggests that any work toward dismantling oppression and promoting liberation contributes to sexual and domestic violence prevention, whether directly or indirectly. They seek to engage communities that are marginalized to advance the theory and practice of Prevention Through Liberation.

OPERATIONALIZING ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICES: LISTENING, UNDERSTANDING, RESOURCING

The coalition developed a set of practices that can help move towards liberation and preventing violence. At the core of these practices is listening to communities about the impacts of oppression and honoring spaces where people are resisting violence. To truly understand the issues and allow communities to heal, the coalition sees the importance of better understanding underlying historical trauma. For instance, understanding how policies and practices led to aboriginal children being torn apart from their families and sent off to boarding schools can help understand some of the current-day struggles aboriginal families face. They also emphasize the need to look outside of the mainstream culture and promote and support leadership from communities that are marginalized. Overall, the coalition tries to support innovative, restorative prevention efforts by and for communities themselves.

To further operationalize this work, the coalition has funded grantees through mini-grants offering opportunities for communities to increase their capacity for culturally specific or culturally responsive anti-oppression prevention-based work in the state. To build their capacity, one program used funds to hold listening sessions with LBGTQ+ youth and adults to improve their curriculum in ways that de-bunk myths and support their needs in the community.

PREVENTION THROUGH LIBERATION IN ACTION: PROYECTO UNICA

In 2017, the coalition released a call for applications and selected El Programa Hispano Catolico Proyecto UNICA as the first Prevention through Liberation grantee. Proyecto UNICA has a track record of being culturally-grounded and creating culturally-specific programs that focus on youth empowerment and community building with middle and high school aged youth. Young people are given the opportunity to discuss topics such as healthy relationships, oppression and power, and dig into specifics of what they need to feel safe or how power dynamics can play into issues around consent.

Rather than using a lecture format, conversations are centered on identity, making sure young people's stories and experiences are shaping the curriculum. Proyecto UNICA gives students the power over how to go about these dialogues using arts-based approaches like drawing and theater. Through Theater of the Oppressed, a form of community-based education that uses theater as a tool for social change, students are able to act out scenes based on real-life situations. For example, students shared about how some of their peers were going on social media and posting about "slap butt Friday," a game where boys in the class were slapping girls' butts. They were able to use theater as a medium to show what was going on, how it was being normalized and how to address it. In addition to using different forms of art, Proyecto UNICA has also taken students on field trips to history museums and an exhibit of the civil rights movement. Students also have staged a walkout in support of the anti-gun violence movement, and they focus on self-care. Together, these activities center the young people and their experiences, build a stronger sense of community and trust between them, and show youth that they matter.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE MOVEMENT BY SHOWING UP HOLISTICALLY FOR YOUTH AND FAMILIES

"In order to make sustainable movement, we need to make sure the community is onboard. We need to show up for the youth and the rest of the community," says Agustin Torres, Sexual Assault Prevention Coordinator for Proyecto UNICA. In addition to engaging youth, Proyecto UNICA also works with families and institutions to support social change toward liberation and prevention. For example, they host monthly parent groups on how to navigate systems and how to talk about healthy relationships, supporting them in developing the skills to facilitate meetings and drive action. The goal is to empower parents so they too can be agents of change.

Oregon is recognizing oppression as being at the root of sexual and domestic violence and oppression work as violence prevention. Both the Oregon Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence and Proyecto UNICA see their roles as facilitators of change, but recognize the role of communities as the agents of social change and safety. They continue to focus on helping build capacity so that communities have the power to shape their environments and relationships as part of the Prevention through Liberation Movement.



Proyecto UNICA has also taken students on field trips to history museums and an exhibit of the civil rights movement.
Photo provided by Agustin Torres.



Student artwork was presented in an art showcase. Students use arts-based approaches which encourage participatory action among students to take on sexual violence as a school prevention issue.
Photo provided by Agustin Torres.

Since 1991, Keri L. Moran-Kuhn has been engaged in supporting survivors. Her work began in Ohio, then continued in the Rocky Mountains of Montana and eventually lead her to Oregon in 2000. Keri has been with the Coalition since 2005 in various roles and currently is the Associate Director. Keri works on behalf of Oregon's local domestic and sexual violence community-based programs and utilizes her skills advocating for survivors and for the programs who serve them, with state systems as well as nationally. She is the proud mama of three.

Agustin Torres is a Sexual Assault Prevention Coordinator with El Programa Hispano Catolico, where he collaborates with Latinx and Native communities to reinforce the infrastructure for community-led sexual assault prevention work. He believes that systemic oppression can be dismantled by the power and expertise of the communities experiencing its violence, and that these communities are the true experts in sexual assault prevention. Agustin was raised by immigrants, migrants, communities of color, LGBTQ+ folks, women of color, grassroots organizers, and his mama.

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RESOURCES

- Prevention Through Liberation: Theory and Practice of Anti-Oppression as Primary Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence
- Dinámicas for Popular Education

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