

Community Connections: Key in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michigan Rape Prevention &
Education Program

2020

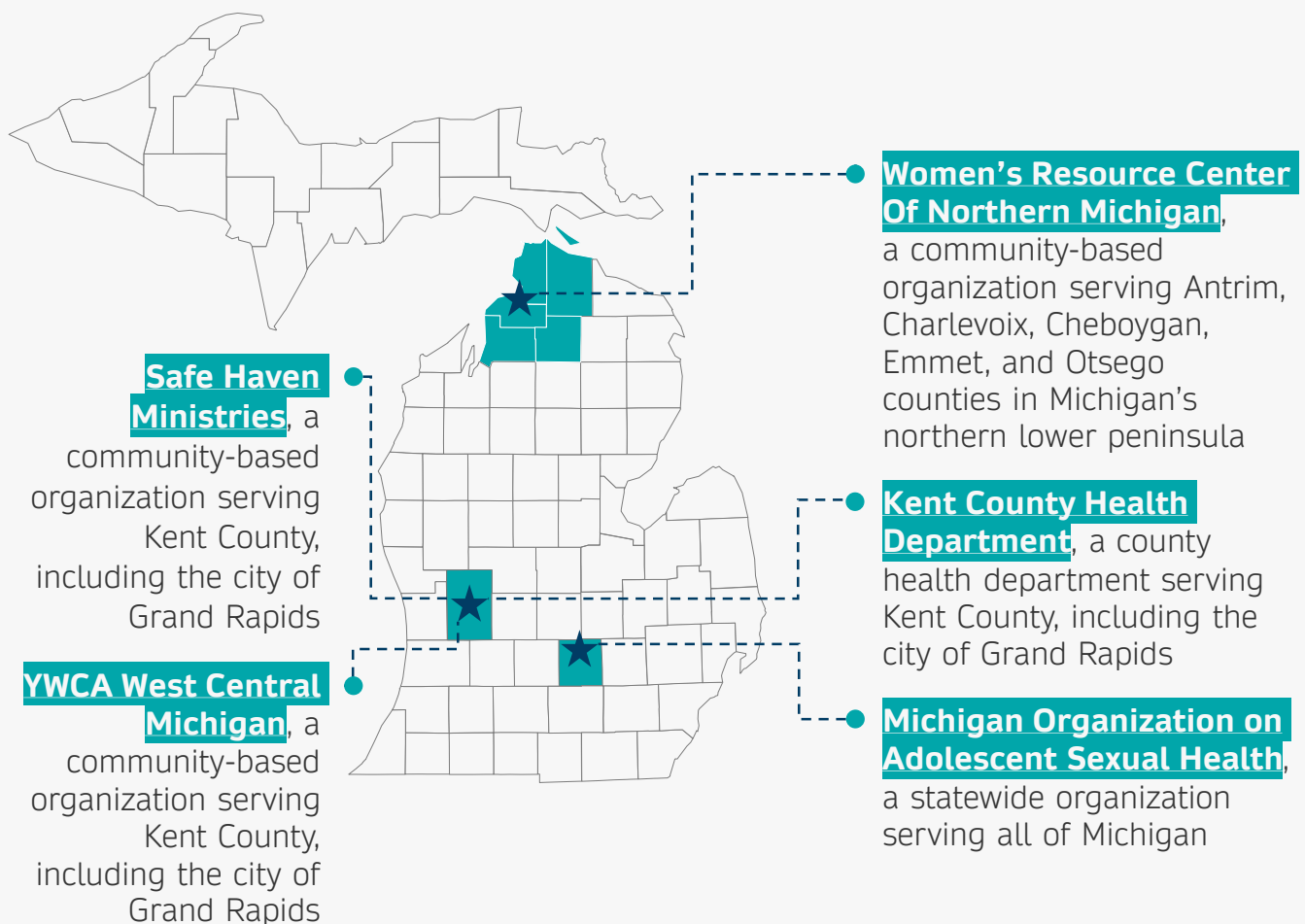
Center for Healthy Communities – MPHI
Published March 2021

Michigan's Rape Prevention & Education Program

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The closure of most Michigan schools, businesses, and organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic meant Michigan Rape Prevention and Education (MI RPE) subrecipients had to quickly pivot to keep their sexual violence (SV) prevention work going. Despite the many challenges a pandemic brings, MI RPE subrecipients were able to successfully engage new partners and grow their projects.

The five MI RPE grantees represented various geographic regions and communities.



A qualitative analysis of subrecipient data collected quarterly during the pandemic showed that community connections with partners and focus populations were the key driver to successfully continuing SV prevention work. Here are highlights showing how subrecipients found ways to continue to build and expand important community connections despite the pandemic, followed by some lessons learned along the way.

Michigan Organization on Adolescent Sexual Health Expanding Reach Through Virtual Platforms

The Project



The Michigan Organization on Adolescent Sexual Health's (MOASH) Michigan Youth Girls Advisory Board (MYGAB) project focuses on increasing leadership opportunities for self-identified girls and nonbinary youth.

MYGAB members had met in-person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting in-person had many benefits but also challenges such as struggles to recruit members in rural areas and scheduling conflicts. Due to the pandemic, MYGAB meetings and activities moved to virtual platforms and focused on increasing its social media presence. The project used innovative strategies to maintain attendance, connection, and engagement, including sending care packages to MYGAB members.



MOASH successfully supported participation of 15 youth in virtual MYGAB meetings, provided professional development activities for participants, and increased participant knowledge around the Title IX federal civil rights law.



Virtual outreach also led to the successful engagement of 35 youth in virtual movie nights and webinars.



The project's focus on increasing their social media presence included engagement of youth members and led to Instagram posts reaching 1,647 individuals and Facebook posts reaching 9,500 individuals.



MYGAB is already planning a virtual statewide youth retreat in the coming year.

Exploring New Partnerships and Populations

The Project



Safe Haven Ministries' (SHM) Gender Equity Reading Initiative (GERI) promotes positive social norms for Kent County children and families with books, accompanying reading guides, and toolkits that examine themes around social norms, female empowerment, and violence prevention.

When COVID-19 closed local libraries and a bookstore that were key to accessing communities and distributing GERI materials, SHM partnered with the Hispanic Center of West Michigan (HCWM) to reach western Michigan's underserved Hispanic population.



The partners identified HCWM food distribution events as a way to safely distribute GERI materials, and SHM staff translated GERI materials (parent toolkit, children's reading guide, one GERI virtual story time) into Spanish and added several Spanish-language and Spanish/English-language books to previously selected English-language books.



Approximately 305 members of the local Hispanic community received over 200 GERI books and materials at HCWM food distribution events.



Evaluation feedback included parents appreciating access to books in both English and Spanish that reminded them of their cultures.



Book distribution was so well received that SHM created several virtual story times, including one in Spanish.



Partnering with HCWM allowed the GERI project to continue to move forward and to access a population that has historically been under-served.

Women's Resource Center of Northern Michigan

Expanding Relationships with Current Partners

The Project



Women's Resource Center of Northern Michigan's Campus Climate Campaign focuses on promoting social norms that protect against violence in Northern Michigan schools.

Public schools in Petoskey have been active partners throughout the project. Because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person activities, project staff expanded relationships in Petoskey Schools to include the Food Services Director and a school-based behavioral health counselor.



These expanded relationships provided project staff opportunities to continue engagement through involvement with distributing care packages to Petoskey community families.



Care packages of free lunches were already being distributed to Petoskey families, and the expanded relationship provided an opportunity to add additional materials to these care packages.



Items selected for these care packages included a mindfulness activity to increase parental resilience, a local resource handout, an activities handout focused on increasing family connection, and positive affirmation sticky notes to increase child social and emotional competence.



The care packages were distributed to 200 families in the Petoskey area.

YWCA of West Central Michigan

Adapting Materials to Reach New Populations

The Project



The YWCA of West Central Michigan's Good Nightlife Project (GNP) focuses on reviewing, developing, and implementing policies for local establishments serving alcohol to create violence-free environments. GNP policy work is supported by training service staff in these establishments on bystander intervention and implicit bias.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic closed or limited the services that Michigan restaurants and bars can provide, GNP activities could not continue as planned. An email conversation with a project volunteer facilitator led to an opportunity to adapt the project by partnering with a local university, Grand Valley State University (GVSU).



GVSU holds an annual Teach-In event that focuses on offering mutual education on inequalities, social justice, and systems of oppression between students, faculty, and staff.



The YWCA was invited to virtually adapt their GNP training into a module for the Teach-In, and they subsequently successfully facilitated a virtual session at the Teach-In Event with five students.



The adaptation to a virtual setting allowed the project to continue moving forward during the pandemic and meet a longer-term project goal of on-demand training.



GNP now plans to establish new partnerships with local service industry businesses, using the virtual training materials to continue project activities.

The Project



Projects were put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the reassignment of Kent County Health Department's (KCHD) Sexual Violence Prevention lead staff.



KCHD staff were involved in contact tracing in Kent County during the worst of the pandemic in west-Michigan.



While this impacted KCHD's ability to engage in RPE activities, we want to recognize and acknowledge the critical importance of local public health staff in helping to stop the spread of COVID-19 and the vital role that a strong national, state, and local public health infrastructure play in keeping every Michigan community—and every Michigander—safe and healthy.

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Lessons Learned

Community connections are vital to successful, sustainable SV prevention work. Here are key lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic that MI RPE subrecipients will keep using to build and enhance strong community connections.

Lessons Learned

Foster Connections with Non-Traditional Partners

Establishing connections with non-traditional partners opens access to new resources, information, and populations and increases reach across community organizations and populations.

Build Connections with New Populations

Expanding to include new populations increases a strategy's reach with populations that may otherwise be excluded.

Expand Connections with Current Partners

Expanding connections with current partners can help strengthen connections at all levels of a partnership. It can lead to working with new people, organizations, and systems and increase access to focus populations through non-traditional routes.

Expand Connections through Adapted Materials

Adapting materials for use with new populations allows strategies to reach a larger audience and potentially have a larger impact.

Expand Connections through Accessible Technology

Focusing on the positives of virtual engagement (e.g., reaching populations not previously able to participate due to geographic issues) can help to increase the reach of and engagement in project activities.



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