



Santa Clara County – Peer Health Education Executive Summary 2025 CSAC Challenge Awards

Overview – Peer Health Education, the first peer-to-peer health education program in a juvenile detention facility, empowers incarcerated youth to teach their peers essential health topics.

Challenge – Youth in the juvenile justice system face higher rates of mental health issues, substance use, sexually transmitted infections, and unintended pregnancies compared to their peers. At the same time, justice involved youth often lack access to reliable, age-appropriate health information. Traditional teaching models in detention, which are led by authority figures, have proven less effective, as system involved youth often distrust or disengage from adults. To address this and in full collaboration with Custody Health, the Probation Department built and supported a peer-led health education model.

Solution – To ensure the model was not only medically accurate, but also relevant, trusted, and engaging, the program creation included partnering with the facility’s Youth Advisory Council, co-developing four learning modules: Healthy Lifestyles, Substance Use, Reproductive Health, and Sexually Transmitted Infections. Training for youth peer educators occurred during weekly leadership meetings with medical staff, community partners, and the Probation Department. Youth educators were engaged in teaching their peers in small housing pods, supported by probation counselors and healthcare staff to ensure accuracy when facilitating educational material.

Peer educators receive scripts and support to deliver consistent, evidence-based information and earn certificates and recognition for their leadership in facilitating the four-week peer education curriculum that uses interactive activities, relatable examples, and youth driven discussion. Examples of curriculum include demonstrating infection spread with UV-reactive lighting, using “beer goggles” to show the effects of alcohol, and playing games like “Anatomy Taboo” and “contraception jeopardy.”

Innovation – This program stands out as the first-of-its-kind in a juvenile detention facility, breaking new ground in how health education is delivered to detained youth. Its innovation lies in giving youth the lead

role in designing and teaching the curriculum, shifting away from traditional authority-driven models. By using a trusted messenger approach, the project leveraged natural peer influence during adolescences to make health information more credible and relatable. The curriculum itself is innovative in its use of interactive games, roleplay, and hands-on activities rather than lectures, making difficult topics like substance use, sexual health, and sexually transmissible disease prevention both approachable and engaging.

Results – The initial pilot delivered measurable and meaningful results, as published in the Journal of Adolescence- 2025, Teaching Each Other. Participants of the program demonstrated significant increase in health knowledge, particularly in the areas of substance use, reproductive health, and sexually transmissible diseases, with noted statistical improvements across three of the four modules. Further, peer educators gained confidence in both leadership and public speaking, reporting a stronger sense of responsibility and placing importance to their role. The reception from the participants was overwhelmingly positive, with both educators and learners describing the program as empowering and useful in helping them, “Learn ways to take care of myself.”

Replicability – This one-of-a-kind program demonstrates a scalable model that can be adopted across other juvenile facilities, as well as vulnerable youth settings. The framework is simple: identify youth leaders, co-create health content with them, provide training with medical, community, and probation partners, and support peer-to-peer teaching with staff oversight. The curriculum was created to be activity based, developmentally appropriate, and adaptable, it can be replicated in other jurisdictions with local tailoring.

Project or Program Contact – David Campos, Deputy County Executive, 70 W. Hedding, East Wing, 11th Floor, San Jose, CA 95110; (669) 294-6157; David.Campos@ceo.sccgov.org

Additional Materials – A journal article is attached to the web form.