

Boys and Men as Agents of Change: Engaging boys and men in domestic and sexual violence prevention

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Historically, domestic and sexual violence has been viewed as a “women’s issue.” While women and female identified individuals are disproportionately impacted by these crimes, there has been a growing movement in the field of violence prevention to reframe this narrative and identify domestic and sexual violence for what it is; everyone’s issue- but particularly, a men’s issue.

Why is Domestic and Sexual Violence a Men’s issue?

Jackson Katz, an expert in the study of masculinities, shares, what he calls, “a paradigm shifting perspective,” in his famous TED Talk, “Violence Against Women: It’s a Men’s Issue.” According to Katz, by calling domestic and sexual violence a women’s issue, men may fail to recognize or choose not to acknowledge their role in the movement to end violence against women.¹ A part of this resistance may be in part to the assumption that violence being viewed as a men’s issue inadvertently insinuates that all men are violent; and that is not the case. While the overwhelming majority of violence against women (and other men, at that) is committed by those who identify as male, it is widely known and accepted that most men, indeed, are not violent. However, all men, in some way (intentionally or not), reinforce and support the conditions that allow violence to take place; these are called “root causes.” In his TED Talk, Katz asks, “What is it about men that allow violence to take place at pandemic rates?” Rather than assuming this is an individual issue, Katz urges listeners to shift their focus towards the social systems and institutions (i.e., media, education, policy, etc.) that produce abusive men.¹

The Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence (DCADV) has championed this way of understanding men’s violence against women. Since 2004, DCADV has worked to engage boys and men in promoting healthy relationships by increasing the individual and organizational capacity of others to recognize the connection between acts of domestic violence and community norms that promote hypermasculinity, violence, and inequality in relationships. The statewide “buy in” to view boys and men, not as part of the problem, but as part of the solution - agents of change - grew after DCADV hosted a special “Call to Men” roundtable event in 2010 with long-term supporter Tony Porter, co-founder of the national A CALL TO MEN organization. At this event, participants began to identify ways to challenge harmful norms and replace them with ones that promote concepts of healthy manhood, equality, and respect. Community members enthusiastically responded to a call to action that was made during the event, and Delaware Men’s education Network (MEN) was born.

How do Harmful Gender Norms Contribute to Violence?

Delaware MEN created a safe space for thoughtful, concerned male identified citizens to begin (or for some, continue) their exploration of masculinity and how traditional notions of masculinity (i.e., don’t show emotions/cry, be tough, don’t ask for help, don’t look weak, etc.) contributed to violence. Years later, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Prevention Institute affirmed the work of DCADV and Delaware MEN members with their

release of “Connecting the Dots: Understanding the links between multiple forms of violence”. Backed by rigorously evaluated research, it was now recognized that the adoption of harmful norms around masculinity is, indeed, connected to child maltreatment, teen dating violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, youth violence and bullying.²

One might ask if this means there is something “wrong” with masculinity and DCADV would argue that’s not necessarily the case. As our dear friend, and longtime supporter, Tony Porter, said in his famous “A Call to Men” TED Talk, “Now I also want to say, without a doubt, there are some wonderful, wonderful, absolutely wonderful things about being a man. But at the same time, there’s some stuff that’s just straight up twisted, and we really need to begin to challenge, look at it and really get in the process of deconstructing, redefining, what we come to know as manhood.”³

Delaware MEN provided a space to promote those “wonderful, wonderful, absolutely wonderful,” things about being a man, while also exploring those “straight up twisted,” things to which Porter referred (Figure 1). What are those twisted things? They are the real implications (i.e, engagement in risky behavior, decrease in health promoting behaviors, substance use and abuse, inflicting violence on self and others) of forcing boys and men into a small and narrow “man box,” subsequently limiting their ability to express their manhood in ways that are healthy for themselves and others, as well as maintaining a system where violence against women, other men and marginalized groups is reinforced, encouraged and normalized.

Figure 1. Zig, a resident of the City of Wilmington, worked with members of his youth group to develop a pro-social media messaging campaign to uplift Black and Brown boys and men, combatting the negative and restrictive stereotypes placed upon them.



To counter this, Delaware MEN worked toward engaging other men in the community to recognize the implications of adopting harmful gender norms, but more importantly, identify ways to develop conditions where all people can be healthy, happy, safe, free from violence and liberated; a world where all people, especially boys and men, can authentically be themselves.

How are We Engaging Delaware Men in Violence Prevention?

While the original Delaware MEN provided a space for individual growth and created an avenue for men to start talking to other men about masculinity and violence prevention, as time passed, it was clear that there was a need for comprehensive, community organized efforts. With support from the Delaware Division of Public Health's Office of Women's Health, DCADV received Rape Prevention and Education (RPE) funding, allowing the coalition to "scale up," and expand its original mission of mobilizing individuals, to mobilizing campus, military and community based groups to build sustainable initiatives.

Delaware MEN Partner Spotlight

"Men of Color Alliance and Men's Council, DSU Student Organizations, are proud to stand with DSU's partnership with Delaware MEN. We seek to create safer spaces and build communities that provide avenues for men to learn more about their role in their neighborhoods and to also feel empowered to be the change needed to end violence."

— Kyle Sheppard, President of MOCA and Men's Council, Senior at Delaware State University (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Kyle Sheppard, President of MOCA and Men's Council, DSU



To date, eight diverse partners from across the state of Delaware have joined together to develop and sustain best practices for engaging men in sexual and domestic violence prevention.

Membership includes:

- Delaware State University
- Wilmington University
- CAMP Rehoboth
- Hilltop Lutheran Neighborhood Center
- One Village Alliance
- Delaware National Guard
- Dover Air Force Base
- University of Delaware

One unique aspect of the Men’s Education Network is that very few of the partners work directly in the domestic and sexual violence prevention field. Rather, they address²:

Risk Factors <i>(things that increase the likelihood of violence)</i>	Protective factors <i>(things that decrease the likelihood of violence)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Community Violence • Diminished Economic Opportunities • Poor Neighborhood Cohesion • Low Academic Achievement • Witnessing Violence • Mental Health Problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating Resources • Access to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services • Community Connectedness • Family Connectedness • Commitment to School • Connection to Pro-Social Peers and Caring Adults

Recognizing that most social problems are interconnected and share the same root causes, Delaware MEN actualizes the CDC “Connecting the Dots” framework, bringing together partners from multi-sectors to engage in prevention across the social-ecology (individual, relationship, community and society). This allows for greater impact due to the development and implementation of strategic initiatives that mitigate risk factors and promote protective factors for, not only domestic and sexual violence, but many other public health issues too.²

By developing this safe space for dialogue, shared learning and networking, Delaware MEN partners have begun, or continue, to sustain quality, effective, and comprehensive, community-driven strategies that, not only engage men in violence prevention, but also address the trauma that can result from boys and men being exposed to traditional masculinity, as well as the trauma that men from marginalized communities may experience from chronic adversities (i.e. discrimination, poverty, racism and oppression).

In the last three years, Delaware MEN has:

- Brought in national trainers, like Men Can Stop Rape, to build organizations capacity to employ violence prevention strategies geared towards Delaware boys and men;
- Provided scholarships to Delaware MEN Partners to attend local, regional and national trainings to increase their individual capacity but also to bring their new knowledge and skills back to Delaware MEN partners, subsequently filtering into their respective communities;
- Developed pro-social, gender transformative public health media messaging / social norms campaigns to promote healthy gender norms and violence prevention;
- Worked in collaboration to host statewide screenings of *The Mask You Live In*, a film that explores America’s narrow definition of masculinity and its subsequent impacts;
- Promoted community connectedness, a known protective factor (things that decrease the likelihood of violence), through events like free community dinners and discussions;

- Facilitated trainings across the state to assist others in increasing their gender analysis (the ability to identify, understand and explain gender differences and power dynamics);
- Embarked on a journey to understand and apply anti- oppression / social justice frameworks to help ensure Delaware MEN prevention efforts are inclusive, culturally relevant and community specific;
- Identified (and continues to invite) diverse community partners who are committed to working in collaboration towards a unified goal: ending violence against women and creating spaces for boys and men to live safe, healthy, authentic lives.

What Can I do?

While the focus of Delaware MEN is to engage boys and men as agents of change working towards ending domestic and sexual violence, DCADV recognizes that every person, regardless of their gender identity, has an important role to play. Those who wish to join Delaware MEN and DCADV on this journey of creating conditions where all people can thrive can start by doing the following:

- Visit www.dcadv.org to learn more about joining DCADV as a supporting Member (an individual committed to ending domestic violence in the state of Delaware);
- Visit www.delawaremen.org to learn more about the Network and the great work Partners are doing in their communities;
- Explore resources to better understand healthy masculinity, violence prevention and healthy relationships. A good place to start is the “resource” section on the Delaware MEN website: www.delawaremen.org;
- Challenge harmful norms and behaviors that promote or normalize violence against women and other marginalized groups;
- Support individuals and organizations in the state of Delaware that are committed to creating healthy, safe communities free from structural violence (things that harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic human needs);
- Align with social justice movements that are addressing the unfair conditions that keep marginalized groups from living healthy, safe, fulfilling lives; because, when one person hurts, we all hurt.

For more information about Delaware MEN, contact DCADV’s engaging Men Project coordinator at delawaremen@dcadv.org.

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