OVC Bulletin

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SAFE HARBOR: A SCHOOL-BASED VICTIM ASSISTANCE/VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM

An unprecedented level of national concern about crime has ensued following incidents of high-profile violent crimes perpetrated by and against youth. As evidenced by several fatal school shootings in rural and suburban communities across the United States, school violence is not just an isolated problem occurring in destitute, inner-city neighborhoods. Rather, violence by and against youth is affecting nearly all young people across the country and its impact on youth and their communities is devastating and longlasting.

In addition to the demand for solid, structured violence prevention materials, there is an equal need for services to support students who are witnessing, experiencing, and otherwise being affected by violence. Teachers, school administrators, and others who work with youth have observed a vicious cycle: Young people who have been victimized often end up engaged in violence again, both as perpetrators and victims. Research has validated these observations and demonstrated that childhood victimization significantly increases the likelihood of future criminal

behavior. Furthermore, victims and witnesses of violence experience a wide range of emotions, including helplessness, vulnerability, fear, anger, and self-blame. Young people may not understand the range of emotions they are experiencing or may lack the words to express them and, therefore, will often "act out" the experience. The victim may, in turn, victimize someone else and thus act out the cycle of violence in the process.

This bulletin describes Safe Harbor, a promising practice that addresses both violence prevention and victim assistance in school-based settings. It also discusses the demographic and implementation differences in the school sites that are replicating the program and evaluations of the program's effectiveness.

Program Background

The Safe Harbor program was developed in 1991 by Safe Horizon in New York City. The mission of Safe Horizon is to provide support, prevent violence, and promote justice for victims of

Message From THE DIRECTOR

Every day, violence in schools, and in the families and communities where students live, challenges students' ability to perform well in school and develop to their greatest potential. Because violence happens in multiple settings and has multiple causes, prevention and intervention strategies must address both individual and social factors.

The Safe Harbor victim assistance and violence prevention program developed by Safe Horizon in New York demonstrates the benefits of this multidimensional approach. First implemented in New York City in 1991, Safe Harbor offers an innovative combination of victim assistance and violence prevention strategies for schools to increase the safety and well-being of their students and address family and community concerns.

In 1997, the Office for Victims of Crime funded Safe Horizon to launch a national replication of the Safe Harbor program. This bulletin discusses the Safe Harbor model and the replication process. It also describes the training and technical assistance available through Safe Horizon for schools and communities interested in joining this replication effort.

John W. Gillis
Director

crime and abuse, their families, and their communities. Prior to the Safe Harbor program, Safe Horizon had responded to the problem of school violence primarily by developing conflict resolution programs. Although these programs prevented peer conflicts from escalating into violence, Safe Horizon soon realized that this approach was not addressing the underlying causes of these conflicts and the impact of family and community violence.

The Safe Harbor program was developed to address the underlying causes of conflicts. The five core components of the Safe Harbor program are designed to help students, faculty, and families cope with the violence they struggle with in their lives—not only in school, but also at home and on the streets. Because violence happens in multiple contexts and has multiple causes, most violence prevention experts agree that prevention strategies must address several levels of intervention (Tolan and Guerra, 1996). Of these levels, the Safe Harbor program focuses on the following three:

Individual. Modify beliefs, attitudes, and norms to help young people develop behaviors that support nonviolence.

Interpersonal. Enhance relationships with peers and family to buffer youth from the effects of exposure to violence.

Social Context. Change aspects of the setting and climate that contribute to violent behavior (Tolan and Guerra, 1996).

Program Components

The Safe Harbor program has five core components or strategies intended to address one or more of these levels:

■ A victim assistance/violence prevention curriculum that includes 10 core lessons. These lessons are interactive and explore topics such as the impact of violence and victimization on individuals, families, and communities; the influence of peers, family, and culture on attitudes and beliefs about violence; and the development of safety strategies, communication, and support skills. Seven modules address topics such as dating violence, sexual harassment, family violence, and the impact of bias crime and gang violence on individuals and communities. Through role playing and modeling, young people examine their experiences, learn to identify their choices, and practice new skills that can be transferred to real-life situations.

■ Individual and group counseling that offers additional support to victimized youth by providing followup to students who want to discuss issues raised in the curriculum classes. Counseling helps youth explore the impact of violence in their lives, work through conflicts, and cope with other difficulties they may experience. Safe Harbor staff work closely with—or are themselves—school social workers and counselors and, when necessary, refer students to clinical services both inside and outside of the school.

■ Parent involvement and staff training that enhances students' relationships with the adults in their lives, further buffering youth from the effects of exposure to violence. Parent and staff training not only helps adults understand the violence youth face but also teaches them ways to cope with their own experiences with violence and victimization. Trainings and workshops may address topics in the curriculum such as the impact of violence and victimization or may explore other topics such as parenting or stress management.

■ Structured group activities that include focused group discussions and skill-building sessions to promote positive peer relationships. These activities provide young people throughout the school community with the chance to identify problems and create solutions, to explore topics in depth, and to learn how to channel stresses and anxieties through other outlets such as artistic activities, physical games, or relaxation activities.

■ A schoolwide antiviolence campaign that aims to build a cohesive culture of nonviolence in the school and provides youth with meaningful opportunities for leadership. Examples of schoolwide campaigns implemented in Safe Harbor schools include poster campaigns, an assembly with a speaker on victimization issues, and a quilt-making project in which every class contributes a square.

> *"Before we had the Safe Harbor program, our attendance was basically about 78 percent of children coming to school every day. Since we've had the program, our attendance rate is now 91 percent of our children attending school. If you feel safe, you come to school."*
>
> —Middle School Principal, Brooklyn, New York

The centerpiece around which the core Safe Harbor program components revolve is a "safe room" in the school where students can receive support throughout the schoolday in an environment that is both physically and emotionally protective. Any student or member of the school community is welcome in the room, particularly witnesses to violence, students who are fighting, and victims of bullying. The students create a code of conduct for the room and ground rules, and they establish chore lists and schedules for taking care of the room. Establishing rules and monitoring the room gives students a sense of ownership, pride, and empowerment and promotes partnership between youth and adults. The room serves as a hub for Safe Harbor services. It can become a place where school personnel refer students throughout the day for conflict resolution, counseling, or time out to discuss what is on their minds. Ideally, the safe room is large enough to accommodate comfortable sofas, a TV/VCR, and games. A large room is preferable because it can accommodate Safe Harbor curriculum classes and parent and teacher workshops in a place where comfort, safety, and trust have been developed.

Schools have limited resources available for additional programming such as the Safe Harbor program, but limited resources often result in creative program structures. Schools that have replicated the Safe Harbor model have had different-size rooms and a variety of teams of school personnel operating the room and conducting the different program components. For example, some schools have a team of teachers facilitate the curriculum in their classrooms and use the Safe Harbor room for counseling with a full-time Safe Harbor counselor. Other schools have established the room as the umbrella under which their existing social services fall and integrated the program

> **"***Safe Harbor is a place you can go to when you have problems. Safe Harbor is also a nonviolence plan. It means to me, do not be a bully.***"**
>
> —Willie, 7th grade, New York City

components into that system. All of the program components are essential to providing a comprehensive violence prevention and intervention program.

National Replication

Due to the success of Safe Harbor's multitiered intervention and prevention model, the U.S. Department of Justice deemed the Safe Harbor program a "promising practice." As a result, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) provided Safe Horizon with funding to replicate the Safe Harbor model on a national level. The following is a summary of these efforts.

Year One, 1997–1998

- Conducted a national needs assessment which reinforced the importance of weaving victim assistance components throughout the program design.

- Established a multidisciplinary national advisory board representing the fields of social work, education, law enforcement, and community programming.

- Formalized the curriculum and added teacher tips to make it more user-friendly. Also created an accompanying *Safe Harbor Facilitator's Manual.*

Portions of these materials were piloted in 17 sites representing 10 states and 1 territory (California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands).

The Safe Harbor materials were used in a variety of settings: statewide health curriculums, alternative schools, leadership and life-skills courses, substance abuse programs, summer school, and a detention center. Feedback was collected through pre- and post-surveys and ongoing telephone discussions.

Lessons learned from Year One included the following:

- The curriculum may meet some statewide academic standards within life-skills, leadership, health, and social studies curricula by incorporating more reading and writing activities and assignments.

- Counseling services are essential to the curriculum. Using the curriculum alone as an intervention strategy is discouraged.

- Teachers who facilitate the curriculum often will need additional training in counseling and facilitation skills.

- School personnel expressed concern that student fear was leading to poor attendance and reduced participation in class. They were most interested in Safe Harbor's capacity to respond to the needs of victims and to provide prevention services in schools.

Years Two and Three, 1998–2000

In the second and third years of the project, 10 Safe Harbor replication sites were established using the lessons learned

from Year One. Select staff members at each school were trained to tailor the Safe Harbor model to their school, including shaping staff teams to implement the program. Safe Harbor staff maintained a partnership with each school by providing ongoing technical assistance and encouraging schools to serve as models for other interested schools in their districts.

Lessons learned from this phase of the project include the following:

■ The school principal's support is essential to ensure buy-in and integration of Safe Harbor into the school community.

■ Onsite technical assistance by Safe Horizon staff augments the Safe Harbor training by meeting the specific needs of individual schools.

■ The program provides schools with the opportunity to improve academic performance by addressing the social and emotional difficulties that lead to disruptive behaviors in the classroom.

■ The program is best operated by a team of flexible and creative staff and provides an opportunity to bring together all of the support services and resources within a school community.

■ School staff trained by Safe Horizon need instruction on how to assess students for trauma related to experiencing or witnessing violence.

■ Safe Harbor training provides staff with the opportunity to explore and identify their thoughts and experiences related to violence and vicarious trauma. Staff are encouraged to receive support when necessary.

Safe Harbor Replication Sites

Safe Harbor staff selected diverse school sites—some geared to special needs and some consisting of mainstream student populations—to replicate the Safe Harbor program. The replication sites and how each program adapted to meet its particular needs are described below:

The Graham School

The Graham School was the pilot for a Safe Harbor program in a special education school. It is a public school linked to Graham-Windham Services for Children and Family Services. This upstate New York school serves 300 children in grades K–12 who reside at the agency as well as those who are sent from surrounding school districts and group homes. The school provides education for high-risk students with special needs. All of the students are classified as economically deprived and participate in the free and reduced-fee lunch program. Many students have been victims of, witnesses to, or initiators of violence. The school's goal in implementing a Safe Harbor program is to help children overcome emotional and behavioral obstacles in order to fulfill their potential. As is typical of high-risk students, the kids are emotionally needy; however, the school provides extensive clinical services and staff to run the Safe Harbor program.

Jefferson Middle School

Jefferson Middle School in Champaign, Illinois, serves 750 students in grades 6–8. A mainstream urban middle school, it is located in a middle-class neighborhood. It serves a large percentage of the district's urban population, which is 68 percent white, 28 percent African American, 3 percent Asian, and 1 percent Hispanic.

Thirty-one percent of the students are eligible for Title One federal grant program services. The goals for the Safe Harbor program are to enhance student success and address self-esteem, anger management, conflict resolution, and social interaction in general and to develop strategies to deal with hate, violence, and bullying in a positive and informative manner.

Lindbergh Middle School

Located in Long Beach, California, this sixth to eighth grade middle school is located in a low-income area. A high percentage of students are on free or reduced-fee lunches. There are 1,412 students in the school with a population that is 49 percent Hispanic, 26 percent African American, 12 percent Asian American, and 13 percent identified as other. The goals of the Safe Harbor are to promote positive self-esteem, develop social skills to enhance students' readiness to learn, encourage high academic achievement, and reduce student attrition. Additional goals are to establish a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to providing mental health and other support services onsite. The school has extensive counseling and referral services and uses the Safe Harbor

❝When you have a problem or something that you can't handle, you can come to Safe Harbor and discuss it with your classmates and teachers. It is fun because we play games and share our feelings with each other.❞

—Leslie, 7th grade, New York City

> **"***The Safe Harbor program is not about discipline—it helps us look at the cause of violence and provide alternative solutions.***"**
>
> —Replication Site Principal, Louisville, Kentucky

program as a coordinating agent within the school. A part-time coordinator staffs the Safe Harbor room. This coordinator, who is a social work intern, helps implement the curriculum, antiviolence campaign, group activities, and parent component.

Long Beach Preparatory Academy

This Long Beach, California, school was one of the early Safe Harbor replication sites. It is an alternative middle school for 250 students who have failed eighth grade. The Safe Harbor room is the school's counseling center and is staffed by the school counselor. Because of the small student population and students' many emotional and social needs, this school provides an open and supportive familial atmosphere that is maintained with very clear rules and boundaries.

John Woodson Junior High School

Located in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, this school serves 698 students in grades 7 and 8. The community experiences high levels of violence that inevitably affects the students. The Safe Harbor program has developed an atmosphere that is safe, healthy, and conducive to learning. The program is implemented by a variety of school staff—administrators, teachers, and counselors—with the goals of reducing the number of students suspended for violence and educating the entire school community on violence prevention. The Safe Harbor room in this school is large and comfortable and is used before, during, and after school.

New Horizons School

New Horizons is the only alternative school on St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. Like the Long Beach Preparatory Academy, it provides students with a creative and familial school environment. It currently serves 75 students: 90 percent are from low-income families and 50 percent have experienced violence. The goals of the Safe Harbor program are to improve academic performance, develop conflict resolution skills, and provide a safe space where students can explore and enhance their identities and self-esteem and learn to choose alternatives to violence. The counselors at this school facilitate the violence prevention/victim assistance curriculum and the principal is very active in implementing schoolwide antiviolence campaigns and presentations.

Shawnee High School, Robert Frost Middle School, Newburg Middle School, and Meyzeek Middle School

All these schools are located in Louisville, Kentucky. All the schools in Louisville are equipped with Youth Services Centers. These social service centers are located on each school's campus and function as the social service wing of the school. They are staffed by at least one counselor and are the backbone of student support services. The Safe Harbor program has been brought into these schools to help structure their existing social service program. Safe Harbor is used as an umbrella in all four schools. Following is a description of the populations these schools serve:

- Shawnee, the Safe Harbor high school pilot, is an Aviation Magnet High School with 600 students in grades 9–12. The student population is 50 percent African American and 50 percent other. Seventy percent of the students are on the free and reduced-fee lunch program. Shawnee represents an inner-city area with a high crime rate. The school struggles with high dropout rates, teen pregnancy, and poor attendance. Many of the students at Shawnee are victims of crime and have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, substance abuse, and poverty.

- Robert Frost Middle School has 477 students in grades 6–8. The school is 70 percent white and 30 percent African American. Sixty-five percent of the students are on free or reduced-fee lunches.

- Newburg Middle School is a Mathematics/Science/Technology School that serves 1,275 students in grades 6–8. Most students come from low-income areas where 52 percent of the residents lack a high school diploma and 54 percent are in single-parent families.

- Albert E. Meyzeek Middle School is a Mathematics/Science/Technology Magnet School that serves 1,280 students in grades 6–8. Approximately 32 percent of the students are African American and 80 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-fee lunches.

Problems Experienced by Replication Sites

*E*ighty percent of the school personnel who were interested in the Safe Harbor program cited the following reasons for their interest:

- To prevent violence in my school.

- To address current violence in my school.

- To learn new skills so that I am better prepared to address violence issues.

- To teach students new skills in coping with violence.

- To change students' attitudes about violence.

- To promote a violence-free school environment.

Between 65 and 70 percent mentioned reasons that include raising awareness about the impact of violence and victimization, providing a safe space within the school, changing students' violent behaviors, and enhancing existing services by adding Safe Harbor components. More than 80 percent of personnel were aware of the following behaviors in their school: threatening, insulting/name calling, hitting, and shoving. Between 53 and 70 percent were aware of acts of intimidation, slapping, and uninvited sexual advances. Thirty-five percent were aware of incidents of choking others and carrying weapons.

School personnel at the replication sites reported that their schools currently address issues of violence most frequently through counseling services (88 percent), parent involvement (64 percent), peer

"Safe Harbor provides our students with an opportunity to work out and explore issues of violence and victimization in a forum that is supportive, empowering, and educational."

—Replication Site Principal, Long Beach, California

mediation/conflict resolution (53 percent), violence prevention posters (41 percent), and teacher trainings and lectures (less than 18 percent). Other methods stated were disciplinary consequences and police/youth services involvement.

As part of the assessment process, a survey asked schools to rate how various stakeholders would perceive certain issues. One issue was the seriousness of violence in the school, and the other was the priority that the stakeholders place on addressing violence. On a scale from one to five (not serious to very serious)—with an average rating of 3.9—school personnel believe they perceive violence to be a more serious issue than do other stakeholders. Teachers and other school personnel rated their view of the seriousness of violence between an average of 3.7 and 3.8; parents and students rated their concern at 3.3 and 3.1 respectively. Participants in the Safe Harbor program perceived themselves as being the most interested in addressing violence in their schools (an average of 4.8). Teachers and other school personnel on average rated addressing violence in school as a priority between 4.2 and 4.4 while parents and students rated it at 4.0 and 3.2 respectively.

Program Evaluation

The East New York United for Safety Report, 1995–1998

An evaluation of the first Safe Harbor programs conducted by the New York University School of Social Work and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed extensive evidence of the programs' accomplishments. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected over a 4-year period and significant findings are listed below:

- Students demonstrated improvement in using conflict resolution strategies, showed increased positive social control, and were more strongly opposed to gang violence.

- Students reported that they incorporated Safe Harbor's ground rules regarding respectful treatment of others into their relationships outside the program.

- Survey results showed that with intensive program participation students benefited in five domains: values about violence, preferred conflict resolution strategies, social control strategies, attitudes toward gangs, and violent behavior (particularly in the community).

- The Safe Harbor program proved most effective in changing student attitudes about violence when students participated in several components of the program, including learning from the violence prevention/victim assistance curriculum, participating in activities within the Safe Harbor room, and/or addressing personal issues in individual counseling.

Safe Harbor Replication Project Advisory Board Members

- The evaluation supported the use of a "victim assistance" model to effectively prevent violence among young people.

Safe Harbor Replication Program Evaluation Results, 1999

Safe Horizon also conducted an evaluation of two pilot Safe Harbor Replication sites (Albert E. Meyzeek Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky and Long Beach Preparatory Academy in Long Beach, California) to determine what benefits, if any, children gained from participating in the Safe Harbor program. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected over a 6-month period, and significant findings followed:

- The more a student had been exposed to violence in the past, the more he or she showed increased empathy for others, was less accepting of gangs, and was more likely to resolve conflicts nonviolently.

- Students developed greater self-confidence in their ability to control anger and resolve conflicts nonviolently.

- There was a decrease in students' fighting, anger, and bullying behaviors.

- Students thought the program "made learning fun."

- Students found that both the physical and psychological safety provided by Safe Harbor were critical.

- Students reported that Safe Harbor provided them with productive activities, helped them solve problems, attenuated the presence of gangs in school, provided a safe space to discuss important issues, reduced the number of fights in school, and made the school safer.

References

Tolan, Patrick H., and Nancy G. Guerra. 1996. "Closing Commentary: Progress and Prospects in Youth Violence-Prevention Evaluation." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (vol. 12, no. 5 supp., p. 129).

For More Information

For further information about the Safe Harbor program and the training and technical assistance available from OVC, contact

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Fairfax, VA 22030
1–866–OVC–TTAC (1–866–682–8822)
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E-mail: TTAC@ovcttac.org
Web site: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/assist/
welcome.html

Safe Horizon's Youth Division
718–624–2111

For copies of this fact sheet, other OVC publications, or information on additional victim-related resources, please contact

Office for Victims of Crime Resource Center
P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849–6000
1–800–627–6872 or 301–519–5500
(TTY 1–877–712–9279)
E-mail: askovc@ojp.usdoj.gov
Web site: www.ncjrs.org

Or order OVC publications online at http://puborder.ncjrs.org.

Additional Information

The following organizations have participated in some aspect of the Safe Harbor replication project:

National Middle School Association
4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300
Westerville, OH 43081
1–800–528–NMSA

The After-School Corporation
925 Ninth Avenue
New York, NY 10012
212–547–6950

Educational Development Center, Inc.
55 Chapel Street
Newton, MA 02158
617–964–7100

Safe Schools Coalition, Inc.
P.O. Box 1338
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Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
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