

NEW MEXICO

RAYS Skin Cancer Prevention Program Shines Bright for New Mexico School Children

The North American Association of Central Cancer Registries, Inc., reports New Mexico as having one of the highest rates of melanoma among non-Hispanic white populations in the continental U.S. (35.4 per 100,000 among males and 22.6 per 100,000 among females). There are no comparable data for non-melanoma skin cancer in New Mexico, because population-based surveillance of this type of cancer is not conducted in the United States.

The RAYS Project (Raising Awareness in Youth about Sun Safety) within the New Mexico Department of Health Comprehensive Cancer Program (NMDOH CCP) provides funding and technical support to elementary schools and community organizations across New Mexico to implement sun safety education using various approved curricula. The RAYS Project seeks to reduce skin cancer risk among elementary school children in grades K–6 by educating students about protective behaviors, including seeking shade, wearing sun-protective clothing and sunglasses, staying out of the sun between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., using sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15, and avoiding artificial sources of ultraviolet (UV) light. Many RAYS Project schools have changed policy on their campuses to support these behaviors, including changing recess times to avoid peak UV exposure, allowing students to wear hats and sunglasses, and providing shade on playgrounds. To supplement these educational activities, English- and Spanish-language materials targeting parents have been developed and are distributed to various audiences statewide.

RAYS Project contractors also infuse sun safety education into other health-related community events including health fairs, family festivals, and cancer-specific events. Additional educational strategies in schools include skits, fashion shows, field trips, assemblies, poster contests, and message reinforcement at sporting events. One particularly

passionate RAYS Project contractor developed a how-to guide for developing and sustaining successful sun safety programs in schools. This guide details the challenges, lessons learned, and rewards of implementing a successful sun safety program.

The RAYS Project initially focused on one large metropolitan school system in the state; it now extends into additional urban communities as well as rural areas where fewer resources exist. Since its inception in 2001, the RAYS Project has reached more than 56,000 school-age children, school staff, and community members.

To date, 55 RAYS Project contractors reported implementing sun-safe policy changes in their schools. Some schools, with the support of school staff, teachers, principals, and parent-teacher organizations, have secured funding independently to build shade structures over playground equipment. Contractors' hard work has resulted in some media coverage for RAYS Project activities.

The RAYS Project has experienced many successes. A 2006–2009 multi-year evaluation report revealed that overall, student behavior changed in the desired direction among the majority of groups after receiving sun safety education. The program also has impacted teacher behaviors positively. The evaluation report revealed that between 2006 and 2009, a majority of teachers implementing the RAYS Project consistently practiced sun-safe behaviors themselves and are positive role models for children.

The RAYS Project is the only program in New Mexico that focuses on primary prevention of skin cancer through educational efforts targeting children. Skin cancer prevention has long been a priority for the NMDOH CCP, which will continue to support programs that help children adopt sun safety habits now to avoid health problems that can result from a lifetime of sun exposure.

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