

Testimony of Katherine Reilly, MPH

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Chairman Whitehouse, thank you for the invitation to testify on our programs aimed at preventing teen dating violence through the *Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships* initiative.

I direct the *Start Strong Rhode Island Project*, a partnership lead by Sojourner House—one of six domestic violence member agencies of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Start Strong Rhode Island partners with Young Voices and the Rhode Island Department of Education to develop and implement innovative approaches to preventing teen dating violence. Before coming to Sojourner House, I worked at the Rhode Island Department of Education where I was honored to coordinate the implementation of the Lindsay Ann Burke Act. I appreciate the opportunity to testify along with my colleagues on this panel, and I appreciate your leadership in Congress to prevent teen dating violence.

As background, *Start Strong* is a four-year, \$18 million investment in 11 geographically and ethnically diverse communities across the country funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with support from the Blue Shield of California Foundation. It is the largest national initiative ever funded to prevent teen dating violence and abuse. *Start Strong* is taking prevention to a new level by targeting 11 to 14 year olds to teach them about healthy relationships through education, policy change, community outreach, and social marketing. Through this large investment, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is showing that to truly prevent teen dating violence, we need to focus on middle school. Middle school years are the first time that many youth start establishing romantic relationships and advances in brain development indicate this is the period of social emotional learning and empathy maturity. Here in Rhode Island, we rally our entire community by working with teens, parents, caregivers, educators, and community leaders to start a dialogue and build environments that support healthy relationships.

Teens know what is unhealthy and see negative influences, but youth everywhere need to be educated about what is a healthy relationship. We use evidence-based curriculum in schools to teach that a healthy relationship constitutes of respect, safety, support, individuality, fairness, equality, acceptance, honest, trust, and effective communication skills. By learning and adopting these skills, we can not only prevent teen dating violence and future adult domestic or sexual violence, but other negative behavioral impacts such as unintended teen pregnancy, alcohol and substance abuse, and other behaviors such as bullying.

In order to be effective, our prevention strategies must be comprehensive, frequent and present in every part in the youth's day that includes in school, after-school, at home, and in their community. Our programs also need to be compelling so the messaging is engaging and relevant.

Start Strong Rhode Island brings comprehensive and engaging prevention strategies to our school and community through a few key strategies. We are using Fourth R, an evidence-based healthy relationships curriculum, and have reached over 600 7th and 8th graders since October 2009. This social and emotional learning curriculum integrates interactive storytelling, multimedia, and performance.

Other strategies we are using include "Passport to Social Media," which helps parents prevent abuse in a digital world. We have developed hkupwithrespect.com, an interactive video blog that gets teens talking about what's cool and not cool in relationships, and so far over 300 youth from around the country have shared their stories. A 14 year old girl from Providence wrote on our site: "I go out with an amazing guy, he cheated on me twice. I can't break up with him...every time I get him mad he yells at me and calls me a snake." A 15-year-old girl from Somerset, Massachusetts posted this message: "So my boyfriend's extremely bipolar. He makes me miserable but I love him. I cry almost every time I'm with him and he laughs right in my face."

To complement this work, we have localized "That's Not Cool," a national public education campaign to prevent teen dating abuse. Developed by Futures Without Violence, formerly Family Violence Prevention Fund, in partnership with the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women and the Advertising Council, the campaign uses digital examples of controlling behavior online and by cell phone to encourage teens to draw their own line about what is, or is not, acceptable relationship behavior.

Finally, in October of this year, we will release a videogame that will be the first immersive videogame to support the teaching and learning of positive, protective relationship skills. This is leveraging the power of gaming to create an engaging virtual teen dating violence prevention curriculum.

We are investing significant resources in the social media tools because we know that social and electronic media are no longer a pastime. A recent poll from the Pew Center for American Life shows that half of teens send 50 or more text messages a day, or 1,500 texts a month, and one in three send more than 100 texts a day, or more than 3,000 texts a month. Social media and mobile technologies are key communication and education tools if we want to truly engage and change youth behavior.

While we need to be aware of the risks of these technologies such as cyber-bullying and sexting, we need to utilize them as opportunities. Social media and mobile technologies can be used to promote prevention and responsible bystander behavior. Any effort to stop teen dating abuse and violence must help youth learn to use these technologies responsibly, and use them to disseminate prevention messages.

The videogame as with all of our tools and materials are youth-informed. Youth-informed programs are critical to identifying strategies and tactics to promote respectful, non-violent dating relationships and reducing emotional, physical, and sexual dating violence. We work with Young Voices, a youth

advocacy and action research group, and other youth leaders, to make sure we are talking *with* teens and not *at* teens about the solution. Our youth allow us to use pop culture to stay relevant, and help us know best the stresses and pressures their peers are experiencing, how youth are using new technologies, what role models are being heard, and what messaging is resonating most clearly.

Each of the 11 *Start Strong* communities across the country has innovative strategies and tools to change policy, use social media, and reach parents and older influencers to be partners in this prevention work. I urge you to view activities happening in other states and a model middle school prevention and response policy that has been developed to support these program lessons by going to startstrongteens.org.

To reach and engage youth, it is not enough to teach prevention education in the classroom. Advocates, parents, and youth leaders need to meet kids where they live and play, and online technologies are the way to help them choose healthy relationships on and off line. Any federal policy that attempts to prevent teen dating violence needs to incorporate these lessons and strategies.