

# Sex is Taboo: A Case Study in Policy Development

## Team: Peoria Power Rangers

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## Abstract

Hooterville is a small city of just over 100,000 citizens in Power Ranger County, Timbuktu. The prevalence of STDs (Gonorrhea and Chlamydia) among teens 12 to 18 years of age in Hooterville has been the highest in the state for several years. According to the STD risk assessment survey conducted by the health department, more than 1/3 of teens living in inner city zip code areas have had a STD in the past. About 50% of them have had 2 to 5 sexual partners while 7% said they have had 6 to 10 partners. Approximately 12% of them never use condoms when they engage in sex and 2/3 said they use condoms irregularly.

Last fall during the annual Hooterville Health Expo, Power Ranger County Health Department displayed a poster presentation on the high rate of STDs among adolescents in the Hooterville School District. The Superintendent for the Hooterville School District consciously studied the display and was astounded by the number of reported STDs. He requested additional STD data to be presented at the June Board of Education meeting in order to set change into motion. Though the information was personally presented to the board by the Power Ranger County Health Department Communicable Disease Coordinator, the Board did not act upon the Superintendent's perceived need for change; there was no further discussion or follow up on addressing high STD rates among adolescents.

The community of Hooterville has a long history of being divided and opinionated on sexual health related topics. The community and its leaders are an eclectic blend of persons who have conservative and liberal ideologies when it comes to sexual health, especially adolescent sexual health. Power Ranger County Health Department is aware of the sexual health disparity among high-risk youth of Hooterville. The rate of reported STDs increased 3 to 5% each year for the last 5 years for this age group while the rates for all other age groups have decreased. However, Power Ranger County Health Department has not been successful at bringing the community together to promote change.

This case study will address how Power Ranger County Health Department will complete an **assessment** of the community leaders (Local School Board, Board of Health, County Board, and Faith Based Organizations) to see where they stand on the issue of sexual health. In addition, Power Ranger County Health Department will address **assurance** through community "buy-in" by building consensus around the health disparity among sexually active adolescents and that the community needs to work collaboratively to reduce the rate of STD infections. This case study will also address the core public health function of **policy development**. Power Ranger County Health Department will collaborate with local community leaders to help guide them in implementing effective programs that will benefit all adolescents in the city of Hooterville. By empowering the community of Hooterville to take action, the leadership within the entire community will have the means to implement effective community planning and identification of intervention to reduce STD rates.

## **Sex is Taboo: A Case Study in Policy Development**

This is a case study of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD's) in Power Ranger County, more specifically the town of Hooterville, in the state of Timbuktu. The players involved in the study include Power Ranger County Health Department, Local School District 007, sexually active youth, Churches, local community agencies, and parents of students in the local school district.

### **Hooterville, We Have a Problem**

Hooterville is a town of just over 100,000 citizens in Power Ranger County, Timbuktu. The prevalence of STDs (Gonorrhea and Chlamydia) among teens 12 to 18 years of age in Hooterville has been the highest in the state for several years. According to the STD risk assessment survey conducted by the health department, more than 1/3 of teens living in inner city zip code areas have had a STD in the past. About 50% of them have had 2 to 5 sexual partners while 7% said they have had 6 to 10 partners. Approximately 12% of them never use condoms when they engage in sex and 2/3 said they use condoms irregularly.

The Communicable Disease Coordinator and Nursing Administration at the Power Ranger County Health Department are concerned about these alarming STD rates. There have been articles printed in the Hooterville Gazette addressing STD's in Hooterville. The Communicable Disease Coordinator was interviewed by local paper and did a live interview on the 6 o'clock news, channel KISS TV regarding the communities STD's. Many local physician offices noted an increase in the number of positive STD results. The Power Ranger County Health Department and other community partners have addressed the problem with churches, community leaders, and health care providers. Local School District 007 does offer a sexual health class. However, it only meets the minimal requirement set by the state of Timbuktu. All sexual health teaching is based on abstinence only.

### **The Hooterville Health Expo**

At the yearly Hooterville Health Expo, held each April at the Hooterville Convention Center, Thelma Harper, the Public Health Administrator for the Power Ranger County Health Department, came across Vinton Smith, Superintendent for Local Hooterville School District 007. They discussed issues surrounding Hooterville's high lead rates and the topic of conversation eventually turned to the community's high rates of sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents. Ms. Harper informed Mr. Smith that roughly 75% of the reported STDs were persons between the ages of 12-24, a fact that Mr. Smith was not aware of. He carefully studied the poster presentation on the high rates of adolescent STDs that day.

Several weeks later, Mr. Smith called Thelma Harper at the Power Ranger County Health Department to request STD data for the June School Board meeting. He had read several articles about the community's STD rates that were printed in the local Hooterville Gazette that past March. However, he did not realize the reality of the sheer number of diagnosed STD cases relating to adolescents. He wanted to present the information to the School Board in order to set change into motion.

### **Hooterville Reacts**

Many letters were sent to the Hooterville Gazette regarding the issue. These letters contained mixed messages. Some stressed the need for better sexual education. Some of the writers expressed that they felt that sexual education and condoms only promote sex to the audience. Others felt that moral values were at risk. One letter stated that people get what they deserve. Another opinion expressed was that talking about STDs is nasty and should not be printed in the paper.

Phil Ignoramus, a writer for the Gazette wrote a long article in the newspaper on how condoms only promote sex. The Local School Board had no comment. Some health professionals could not understand why people continue to avoid the problem with the alarming rate of STDs for the community.

Yet nothing was implemented and there was no further discussion after the presentation to the Local School Board. The Board did not act upon the Superintendent's perceived need for change. The Health Department speculated, based on the conversation with the superintendent, that the school district was dealing with bigger issues such as shootings in the school and teachers having sex with students. In addition, the school district has a long standing history of taking conservative approaches.

### **Who Is/Isn't Promoting Change in Hooterville**

Smurf Education Center provides education to the schools. They believe their program is sufficient for sexual education in Local School District 007. Three Local School Board members were interviewed. The first stated that she would like to see more direction from the state regarding the sexual health education curriculum. The second member interviewed did not feel that the community wanted to hear about sexual health. Finally, the third individual thought that the current abstinence only curriculum was sufficient.

The Local School Board adopted abstinence only education. The city has a large Catholic population who are not in favor of change. Neither are most local Protestant churches. After interviewing key individuals it was determined that these groups all favor abstinence only education. Mr. Smith is in favor of change to lower the STDs among adolescents: some of his key staff want to see change

made as well. However, most members of the Local School Board, following the conservative elements in the community, do not apparently feel that the data indicate that a change in the current abstinence-only policy is warranted. The Power Ranger County Health Department promotes changes as well do most health providers and many community organizations. Key individuals reported they see a need for change but they don't think they should be the one to start the change in motion. They have tried in the past but other priorities intervened. The adolescents who are at high-risk for STDs and who have participated in Power Ranger HIV Outreach programs request additional community services. They want to see change too. However, there are currently no avenues for youth participation in policy development.

There are many arguments though on whether or not to implement a change in an effort to decrease the rates of STDs in Hooterville. Some Faith Based Organization members said it was against moral and religious values to teach and discuss sexual health. Some County Board members are in denial that there is a problem. There is controversy over whether or not abstinence programs work. Some parents feel that sexual education will promote having sex for the participants receiving the education. Whatever the case, the STD rates in Hooterville continue to increase, so what is being done now does not seem to be working.

### **Power Ranger County Health Department's Role**

The role of Public Health includes providing the core functions of Assessment, Policy Development, and Assurance. The Power Ranger County Health Department formed a task force to address the problem a few years ago. When this task force met, only public health and some local health care providers came to the table. The other community members, such as the Board of Education, Faith Based Organizations and parents, did not participate. They were not part of the team. There were subcommittees formed from those individuals that did attend and they each worked on their own areas. However, the subcommittees were never pulled back together to accomplish goals. There was also lack of leadership for this task force after the Board of Health President, who had been leading this task force, left. No one wanted to take her place. In addition, the majority of the community leaders (for example, those leaders in Faith Based Organizations, the Local School Board and the medical field) want to be on the "team" but they only want to play by their own rules and only want to be involved to the extent that is convenient for them. Thus, the task force fell apart. Currently, the community expects public health to do all the work to lower the STD rates.

The Health Department has an idea of what they think their role in lowering STD rates should be. They believe this includes, but is not limited to, community assessment, researching how other communities have addressed the same

problem, addressing the problem with the community, bring the "players" to the table, educating the "players" and overall community on the topic and successful methods from other areas, linkage of services, and assisting community providers with treatments, epidemiology, and best practices.

The Power Ranger County Health Department could reconvene the STD Task Force Committee. To be effective they would need a different approach. Careful selection would be needed for who would be at the table. Faith Based Organizations, School Health Teachers, School Counselors, School Health Nurses, Board of Education members, Board of Health members, County Board members, State Board of Education, youth representatives and parents would all need to be represented at the table. The Power Ranger County Health Department has the staff to play the leadership role to put this task force together and coordinate the process. An outside individual could be brought in by the Power Ranger County Health Department to play the role of facilitator and encourage the system thinking approach within the group. Unfortunately there are some barriers that affect the role that the Public Health Department could play. These would include delegation of time and priorities. There is an overwhelming load of work going on all at one time.

### **Community Barriers**

Community barriers include community members not playing well together. Some community members have a "my way or the highway" thought process. Many community members are in denial that there is an STD problem or about some of the sexual practices of adolescents in the community. Some of the people who have the power to make changes do not have a true understanding of the lives of those at the highest risk. They have the mentality that "they just shouldn't be having sex" when it is known that there are a number of adolescents having sex. There are territorial issues among community members that pose a barrier to the role the health department could play. Moral and religious issues are another barrier to process of trying to lower STD rates. And, of course there are people that think talking about sexual health is embarrassing or dirty.

### **Conclusion**

There are many possibilities for Hooterville to attempt to lower the STD rates. They could bring in other community members when they reconvene the STD task force. The community could run mass media campaigns to promote public awareness of the high STD rate in the community. Power Ranger County Health Department services could follow evidenced based practices so they can measure outcomes. The Health Department could try to get more involvement from youth in developing a plan. The Health Department could be more vocal and more "in the face" to get attention drawn to the issue (they have been

passive to date). The Power Ranger County Health Department does not need to re-invent the wheel. They could implement programs that have been proven to work in other communities facing the same issues and tailor them to meet the needs of Hooterville and Power Ranger County. And, the health department should definitely attempt to get more involvement from community members.

## Teacher and Trainer's Guide

1. How can Power Ranger County Health Department get all necessary players to the table? Who are the necessary players and why are they necessary?
2. What kind of assurance should Power Ranger County Health Department be doing more of for this community?
3. Should media be utilized to create attention around the alarming STD rates among adolescents?
4. Should Power Ranger County Health Department approach the state elected official to introduce a bill mandating more comprehensive school-based sexual health education curriculum state wide?
5. What else should Power Ranger County Health Department be doing to convince the community that change is needed?
6. What strategies can be implemented to get past the feeling in the community that talking about sexual health is embarrassing or dirty? How has the discussion been framed so far, by church and conservative community leaders? By public health leaders? Are there ways of framing the discussion that might be able to help people coming from different perspectives find areas of agreement (ex. Focusing on the well-being of adolescents and self-esteem issues)?
7. What should the strategies be to make this a priority within the health department when time and money are limited?