

OPA EVALUATION TA

Partnering with Faith-Based Groups: Lessons Learned from TPP19 Grantees

Introduction







Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) programs need acceptance and buy-in from communities to be successful. Among the 2019 TPP (TPP19) cohort, several grantees partnered with faith-based organizations to expand the reach of their programs, increase community awareness and support for programs, and support program implementation. This brief draws on interviews conducted as part of a cross-site study of TPP19 grantees and highlights the experiences of three grantees that had success partnering with faith-based organizations to deliver evidence-based TPP programs.



- **Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power and Potential (GCAPP)** partnered with a local church and a faith-based private school to deliver The Eban Initiative, a culturally responsive mentorship program that incorporates TPP curriculum, to Black young men and boys in Clayton County, Georgia.
- **Keiki o ka 'Āina Preschool, Inc. (KOKA)** partnered with faith leaders to promote its Hoohiki pilina Project serving Native Hawaiian youth on the Island of Oahu, Hawaii.
- **Life Skills Empowerment and Development Services, Inc. (LEADS)** worked with eight churches to recruit participants and provide space for its Health Education and Relationship Training Services (HEARTS) project reaching Black youth in St. Petersburg, Florida.

These three grantees implemented different programs in culturally and geographically distinct settings (Figure 1). Their experiences revealed potential benefits of and best practices for partnerships with faith-based organizations.

Figure 1. TPP programs implemented with faith-based partners

		GCAPP The Eban Initiative	KOKA Hoohiki pilina Project	LEADS Health Education and Relationship Training Services (HEARTS)
	Curriculum	Reducing the Risk (SRA*)	Love Notes (SRA)	Love Notes (SRA)
	Program length	16 sessions over 6-8 weeks	13 lessons; length varies depending on setting	13 sessions over 2 Saturday "camps"
	Setting	Public schools; faith-based private schools; churches	High schools, KOKA facility, churches	Churches, pregnancy centers, community centers
	Population served	Black young men and boys ages 13-19	Native Hawaiian youth ages 14-18	Primarily African American youth ages 11-14
	Faith-based partners	1 church; 1 faith-based private school	Churches	8 churches
	Role of faith-based partners	Spreading the word about the program; hosting in-person sessions	Promotion and recruitment	Recruitment; hosting in-person sessions

*SRA = Sexual Risk Avoidance

Benefits of partnering with faith-based organizations

Grantees partnered with churches and other faith-based organizations that had deep roots in their communities and existing connections with youth and their families. These community connections supported program implementation in several ways.

- Faith-based partners helped garner buy-in from the community.** In Hawaii, a youth pastor at a partnering church helped promote KOKA's TPP program. Due to his many connections in the community, this partner was able to share information about the program through his ministry, through his work on college campuses, at meetings with other community organizations, and through a weekly roundtable with other local pastors. He noted that the communities in which he works are tight-knit and place a high value on personal relationships. As a trusted and well-known figure, his recommendation carried weight and helped increase support among other faith-based and community-based organizations. Other pastors in his network were similarly connected within their respective communities and were able to use their relationships to help get buy-in from schools.

In Georgia, clergy from a partnering church helped promote GCAPP's Eban Initiative in the community by attending a block party kickoff event, discussing the program with church members, and allowing program implementers to present information about the program at the church. One minister addressed hesitation among some parents by explaining how the TPP curriculum fit in with the mentorship component of the Eban Initiative, which had broad acceptance and appeal.

In Florida, a pastor and head of a local pregnancy center helped LEADS establish partnerships with eight local Black churches. LEADS found that churches, in turn, helped the program gain acceptance in a community that can be skeptical of outside programs.

“They have a relationship with me. They trust me.”
KOKA partner

- **Faith-based partners played a key role in participant recruitment and retention, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.** In Florida, LEADS had success recruiting HEARTS participants through its network of faith-based organizations. Churches recommended the program to their members and recruited participants from existing youth groups. Gift cards provided to individual participants and to churches when participants completed the program offered an additional incentive. Similarly, in Hawaii, faith-based partners helped recruit participants from youth groups, programs on college campuses, and communities experiencing high rates of poverty that appreciated KOKA's incentive for participation. One motivated faith-based partner handled all of the registration paperwork for participants from church communities while KOKA was in the process of establishing an online registration platform.

The COVID-19 pandemic made recruitment and implementation challenging for all TPP19 grantees. In some cases, partnerships with faith-based organizations helped grantees maintain access to youth as they implemented virtual programming. LEADS shifted HEARTS from in-person community-based settings to virtual in late March 2022; in addition to other factors, steady recruitment from faith-based partners helped LEADS continue HEARTS camps throughout the pandemic. GCAPP was unable to deliver virtual programming through the public school system as schools navigated competing priorities and struggled to keep students engaged in online learning. Instead, GCAPP shifted to community-based virtual implementation, which included conducting online sessions with youth and parents recruited through the church. Because many of the students that had previously enrolled through schools were also members of the local church, the program was able to reach some of these students through church-based implementation.

- **Facilitators and partners from faith communities helped engage youth and deliver culturally responsive programs.** Grantees found that facilitators that were from the local community and were motivated by a desire to support young people were effective and engaging. In some cases, these facilitators were also connected to faith-based partners. Two of the three Eban Initiative facilitators were also members of GCAPP's partner church. These facilitators had experience in the community, understood the specific challenges faced by young Black men in the community,



When [facilitators] visited schools, kids would run up to them because they knew them from the community or they went to their church...those kids love those guys."

GCAPP

and had experience working with youth in the program. As such, they were well-positioned to provide culturally responsive programming, and were well-liked by the participants. During the pandemic, Eban facilitators stayed in contact with youth participants and their families through individual outreach made possible by facilitators' connections to the community and faith-based community.

In Hawaii, some of KOKA's facilitators were also members of the partner church. In addition, the youth pastor at the church made space for youth to debrief on topics covered by the Love Notes curriculum "to reinforce the content, and to provide biblical context."

Strategies for effective partnerships with faith-based organizations

Grantees and partners acknowledged that the content of TPP programs may sometimes be at odds with the teachings or values of faith-based organizations, and that some members of faith communities may be uncomfortable with this programming. A facilitator who implemented a TPP program in a church setting experienced pushback from a parent who did not want her child learning about sex; the facilitator explained that, in a church setting "you could face competing priorities, or opposing beliefs...because the church is like 'Hey, no sex, no sex, no sex.'" However, TPP19 grantees' experiences illuminate lessons for overcoming these challenges and making partnerships work.

- **Grantees built relationships with faith-based organizations that saw the need for TPP programming.** GCAPP, KOKA, and LEADS reached out to faith-based organizations in the early stages of program planning and implementation. They found faith-based partners that saw the need for TPP programming in their communities and were willing to take on extra work to support the program and address potential community pushback. One faith-based partner advised other potential partners: "Don't do it unless you think it's going to change lives...real recruitment can happen when you can share from your own beliefs why this is important for our youth to know."

Input from faith communities also helped grantees assess community demand for TPP programming. LEADS included outreach to faith leaders in their informal community needs assessment, and feedback from this group encouraged the organization to pursue additional funding to expand programming to middle school students.

We had meetings with those pastors and described the program that we were thinking about but wanted to get their input, and they felt that there was just a crying need in the community, and that's where we got a lot of our input."

LEADS

- **Grantees chose curricula that met the needs of faith-based partners and their constituencies.** When selecting an intervention, grantees considered fit for the community as well as fit for working with faith-based partners. One faith-based partner appreciated that Love Notes was "approved by the church" and "would not alienate anyone based on religion." Although partners generally did not have concerns about the content of the curriculum, one faith leader appreciated that he was able to review the curriculum before implementation and that the grantee took the time to answer his questions.

Faith-based partners confirmed that the curricula GCAPP, KOKA, and LEADS chose fit their organizations' and communities' needs. Partners noted specific components of the selected interventions that were particularly compelling. For example, KOKA and LEADS' faith-based partners liked Love Notes' focus on relationships and decision making, which has applications beyond sexual relationships. Partners also appreciated the "trusted adult" element of the Love Notes curriculum and its emphasis on including parents and caregivers. KOKA and its faith-based partner thought this worked particularly well for the Native Hawaiian community, which places a high value on family relationships. The mentorship component of GCAPP's Eban Initiative was especially compelling to faith-based partners who understood the challenges facing youth in their community and the need

Most of the churches understand the value of this program. Even though there's no references to scripture, it's another way to help youth make decisions."

KOKA partner

for supportive role models; wrapping the Reducing the Risk curriculum into the mentorship program helped make it acceptable to faith-based organizations and the broader community.

- **Grantees relied on existing relationships in the community to initiate partnerships with faith-based organizations.** Grantees found that relationships were key to forming successful partnerships within faith-based communities, and existing relationships with individual contacts, organizations, and networks helped grantees establish these relationships. LEADS was able to connect with eight churches through an existing relationship with the head of one well-connected partner organization; this proved essential to LEADS' ability to recruit participants and host camps. Two of GCAPP's program facilitators were members of the partnering church, which helped build trust and bring church leadership on board. KOKA was already well-connected in the community, having implemented programs for several decades. An evaluation of the Hoohiki pilina Project found that the program was strengthened by KOKA's network in the community, including its connection with churches. Faith-based partners confirmed that these relationships were key to getting their organization on board with TPP programming and suggested that they would have been less interested in partnership had it not been for these existing relationships.

Tips for grantees

- ✓ **Reach out to faith-based organizations early on.** Faith-based organizations can help inform a community needs assessment and might be able to connect grantees to other community-based partners.
- ✓ **Build on existing personal relationships in the community when approaching faith-based organizations.** Trust is key, and faith-based organizations may be more interested in partnering with a known entity.
- ✓ **Choose faith-based partners that recognize the need for TPP programming and are willing to champion the program.** Faith leaders can be key partners in promoting the program in the community and addressing and mitigating pushback.
- ✓ **Ensure a good fit between program and faith-based partners.** Choose faith-based partners that are comfortable with the selected program curriculum or can help select a curriculum that will be a good fit for the community. Allow time to address partners' questions and concerns.

Overview of study

The Office of Population Affairs (OPA) in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awards annual grants to support teen pregnancy prevention (TPP). In 2018, OPA awarded 14 organizations two-year Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) Phase 1 Tier 2 grants to refine, implement, and formatively evaluate their innovative program models to prepare for a potential summative evaluation. In 2019, OPA awarded another 29 organizations two-year TPP Phase 1 Tier 1 grants to select, refine, and implement evidence-based programs (EBPs). Additionally, the 2019 TPP Tier 1 grantees were expected to use continuous quality improvement processes and conduct process evaluations to support the refinement of the EBP for their community while establishing evidence for broader implementation, and possible OPA support for a summative evaluation.

OPA awarded Mathematica a contract to design and conduct an external cross-site implementation study. The cross-site implementation study had two goals: (1) to document the process that grantees followed to get their programs and staff ready to implement the program and (2) to identify lessons to help future grantees ensure their programs are ready and appropriate to implement in their communities.

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