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Centering Youth in Sexual Health Services & Education

Partner Insights
Report



Washington Youth
Sexual Health

INNOVATION & IMPACT
NETWORK

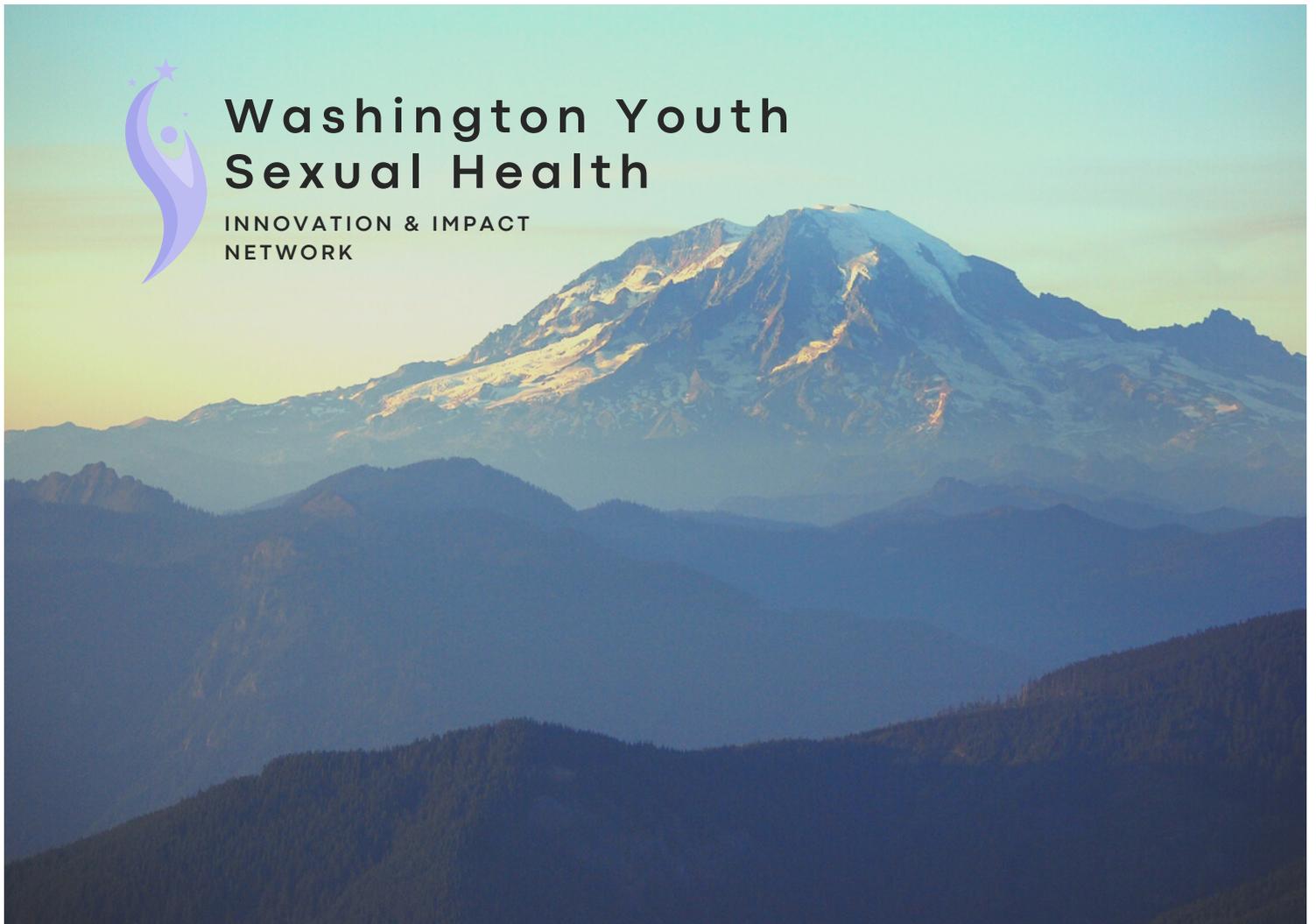


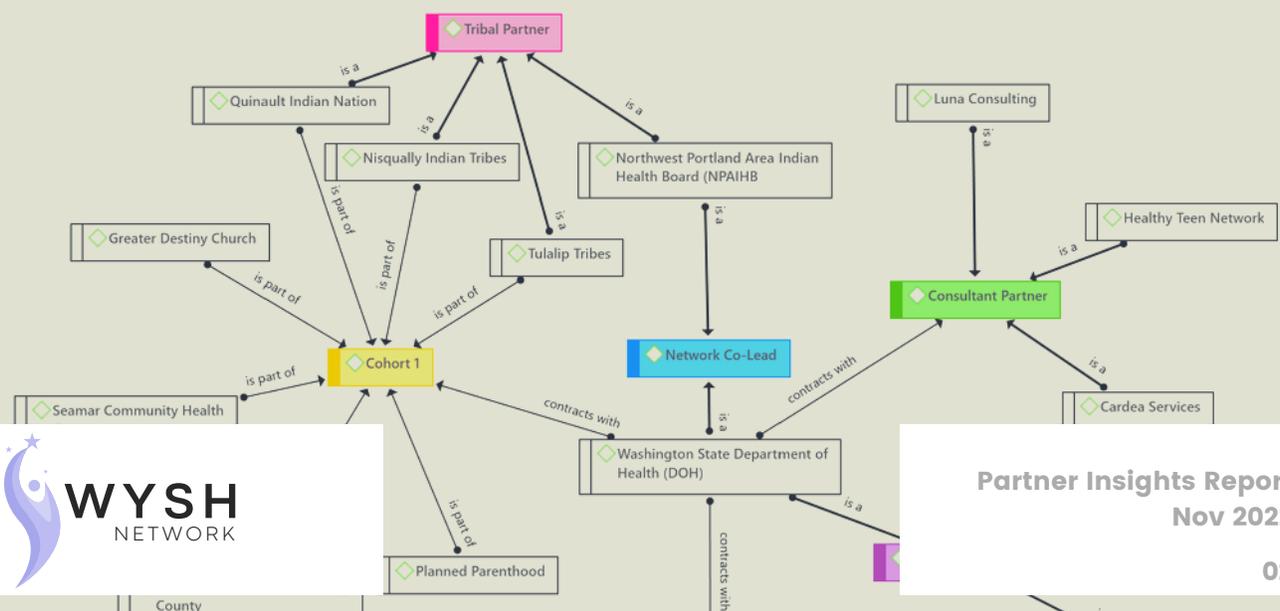
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INTRODUCTION

The Washington Youth Sexual Health Innovation and Impact Network (WYSHIIN) partners explore, develop, and evaluate interventions that improve access to and experience with sexual health care and services, with a focus on Two Spirit, LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC youth. The eleven Network partners use innovative approaches to improve youth sexual health services, educate youth about sexual health services, and reduce barriers to accessing care. The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) and Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB) co-lead WYSHIIN, and aim to nurture an interdisciplinary, statewide collaborative to address systemic issues that contribute to adverse sexual health outcomes among historically marginalized youth. Their approach aims to honor and uplift the lived experience of young people and the community leaders who work with them.

Evaluators at DOH wanted to better understand Network partners' experiences exploring, developing, testing, refining, and evaluating youth-centered sexual health programs in the first two years of Network partnership, and prepare to better serve partners in the final grant year. Evaluation staff completed eleven virtual key informant interviews of approximately one hour each with program leaders and facilitators working directly with youth. Finally, interviews were analyzed for themes, which were discussed and refined with Network partners at meetings to generate a more thorough understanding of the data.



THEME #1

Partners prioritize centering youth voice and have actionable strategies to do so.

Partners have a collection of successful tools and approaches to engage youth on sexual health topics, which help retain youth involvement over time. Youth engaged through WYSHIIN projects have validated these strategies, sharing feedback that they have built leadership skills and confidence through their involvement. To center youth voice in programming, partners emphasize the importance of:

- Building time into project timelines to establish trust before discussing sexual health.
- Financially compensating youth for their time through gift cards or as paid staff.
- Making meetings accessible, inviting, and fun (e.g., sex ed trivia nights) while balancing a mix of virtual and in-person activities.
- Talking about issues that are important to youth and respecting their wisdom, which may include changing agendas to prioritize emergent topics.
- Delivering content in ways youth prefer to receive information.
- Being mindful of when and how parents and caregivers are included, and being explicit with youth about confidentiality and permissions for participating in activities.
- Making communication and support consistent, which includes using text messaging when possible.
- Fighting against the stigma associated with teen pregnancy, and including pregnant and parenting teens in sexual health conversations.
- Supporting youth in owning projects and presenting work to funders or other key decision-makers.

“We had a [clinic art] competition at the local school district and youth from the [council] voted on winners, and through this grant we provided an incentive to the artists and then we put the art up in the clinic. Working with a largely BIPOC population, we can’t ask people for stuff without paying for their work. That’s exploitation. That’s hugely important. I think sexual health education and access to care rely on that youth work.”

-Youth Council Facilitator

THEME #2

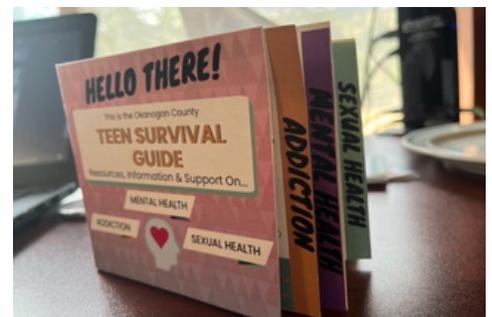
Partnerships with schools are important channels for dissemination and community engagement.

"I'm most proud of the partnership that's become more strong with the schools. Especially when teachers and admin came to the campus visit, they expressed concern around teaching sex ed in classes, and identified gaps in the community. It was very timely to have this grant and be able to support them as a rural community that's concerned about these topics."

-Youth-serving community partner

Partners highlighted several important aspects of partnerships between schools and public health:

- Connecting local clinics with schools to deliver sexual health education or consult on teaching sex ed.
- Nurturing strong relationships with school districts helps improve recruitment and retention for youth events and youth advisory councils.
- Supporting educators in rural communities who have limited capacity to teach sexual health education.
- Providing foundational skills training for discussing sexual health topics to any adult in the school building who might be a trusted adult to a young person.
- Conversations around sexual health often intersect with conversations about sexual assault and harassment in schools.



THEME #3

Partners emphasize the need to embrace more holistic and culturally relevant approaches to sexual health.

Partners highlighted that a key aspect of centering youth needs in programming is integrating sexual health content with a holistic approach to health that includes mental health, leadership skills, online behavior, healthy relationships, anti-racism, and anti-violence education. Approaches to sexual health and education should also be inclusive of family and cultural values. Highlighted strategies to improve cultural relevance include:

- Offering meetings and materials in multiple languages, and tailoring messaging to each audience.
- Honoring cultural traditions in designing and delivering sexual health curricula.
- Considering stigma as a barrier to accessing services and education.
- Valuing lived experiences.
- Changing approaches based on the community's level of comfort with and prior exposure to sexual health content, which may include weaving in sexual health content slowly over time.
- Navigating lack of anonymity in smaller communities, and how this impacts experience with and access to services.
- Integrating trauma-informed approaches and reproductive justice frameworks.
- Using multi-generational approaches to engage both youth and caregivers, and increase their comfort with sexual health topics.

“I’m proud of the fact that we’ve found a way to infuse, of course, the primary topic--teen pregnancy prevention, and sexual health--along with various topics such as self-esteem, self-motivation, career paths, goals, and understanding the times we’re living in as it relates to society and civil rights. [...] One of the reasons we went into that was we know that to dive into more of the sexual health topics we wanted to, we had to establish relationships and trust.”

-Youth-serving community partner

THEME #4

Culturally appropriate resources are critical when engaging Native youth.



“Having the Healthy Native Youth resources, fun beaded condom infographics, and Indigenized health information [has been] absolutely critical for doing effective outreach on a reservation. Being able to share those and have access already, not scramble to create those things ourselves. It’s been huge. I wish more programs had access to culturally relevant and culturally appropriate resources.”

-Youth-serving community partner

Tribal partners highlighted valuable strategies for working with Native youth, while many non-tribal partners expressed a desire to work more intentionally with Indigenous communities to create partnerships for sexual health programs. Conversations about engaging Native youth highlighted:

- Having Indigenized health information readily available.
- Integrating conversations about mental health and sexual health, especially for 2SLGBTQIA+ young people.
- Incorporating families and the broader community in sexual health education.
- The importance of de-stigmatizing teen pregnancy.
- The importance of establishing trust so community members are willing to share information about sexual health.
- The importance of consistency and fulfilling promises that are made when partnering with Indigenous communities.

THEME #5

Project pivots and successes highlight 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion.



“Working in Indian Country on the topic of LGBTQIA2S+ communities, [...] what I’ve found is that it’s not really discussed as an openly accepted lifestyle. [...] seeing all the different Two-Spirit discussions, I love that I can tie this conversation into historical traditions. That this is not new, and isn’t new in Indian Country, and it is actually honored. We’ve been finding the power to bring it back to a cultural tie.”

-Youth-serving community partner

When discussing what partners are most proud of, what feedback from youth stands out, or which strategies didn’t work as expected, partners consistently highlighted the importance of centering the voices of 2SLGBTQIA+ young people in programming.

Specifically, WYSHIIN projects:

- Strive to affirm that their 2SLGBTQIA+ community members are seen and valued.
- Implement strategies to create 2SLGBTQIA+-friendly environments (e.g., gender neutral bathrooms, LGBTQ libraries).
- Improve provider proficiency in providing gender-affirming care.
- Embrace cultural values and historical traditions in 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion work.
- Provide valued safe spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth to create community.

THEME #6

As partners adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, they experience both challenges and opportunities from moving aspects of programs online.

“In the classroom I don't have an opportunity to get feedback from students other than what they give me live. Doing [program] online and getting more feedback to incorporate has been helpful.”

-Youth-serving community partner

“Youth outreach in particular has always been so difficult, even on a reservation where we know who the youth are, we know them. It's still hard, especially since COVID. Before COVID we had a youth council that met regularly just like our Tribal council. It's been hard since that hasn't been happening.”

-Youth-serving community partner

Despite a collective desire to build community in-person, many WYSHIIN programs continue to operate in a virtual or hybrid format.

Challenges related to the pandemic include:

- Delays in starting programs, staffing challenges, and difficulty implementing programs with fidelity to their original plans.
- Cancellation of in-person events.
- Behavioral and mental health challenges youth have experienced throughout the pandemic.
- Challenges adapting youth outreach strategies and workshop activities to the virtual setting.

Opportunities include:

- Capitalizing on social media to conduct more peer-based outreach.
- Virtual meetings contribute to better geographic representation in youth councils.
- Opportunities for more feedback from youth.

LOOKING AHEAD

DOH and NPAIHB will use these themes and partners' feedback for continuous quality improvement. We heard that partners would like more time for sharing, building a professional learning community, and collaborating on papers or presentations. We are planning Open Network Hours on partner-identified topics and will use Network News Briefs and check-ins to communicate about upcoming opportunities for collaboration.



We will also be accountable to sharing updates as we discuss partners' other identified questions and needs:

- Seeking out additional funding to maintain programs, especially compensation for youth.
- Working with partners to maximize flexibility for spending on projects.
- Exploring opportunities to extend project timelines to implement and sustain programs.
- Facilitating opportunities to share lessons learned with partners across the state, rather than technical assistance from external consultants.
- Clear and consistent communication on the contract amendment and invoicing process and support to help ease the administrative burden.

We also heard that partners value using REDCap for reporting, consistent and prompt communication, and evaluation support. We will strive to maintain the components of WYSHIIN that partners appreciate and work on identified growth areas throughout the third and final grant year.

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We thank you for your continued support of WYSHIIN and service to your communities.

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