

WORKING TOGETHER TO INCREASE MALE INVOLVEMENT IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: A CAMPUS-COMMUNITY PUBLIC HEALTH PARTNERSHIP

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Benton County Health Department (BCHD), in collaboration with Oregon State University's Student Health Services (OSU SHS) nominates the Male Advocates for Responsible Sexuality (MARS) program for the 2005 Linkages Awards.

Founded in 2000 by BCHD, MARS is an innovative male involvement program that has achieved regional and national attention as a result of a successful collaboration between a state university and a local county health department. The mission of MARS is to support men age 13 to 25 in taking a responsible role in promoting equality and cooperation in relationships, pregnancy and infection prevention, and overcoming stereotypical gender roles. College males (called MARS Outreach Workers) serve as role models to their peers and deliver the two principal components of MARS—1) Teach sexual health education classes, and 2) Conduct individual sexual health education consultations (“MARS appointments”) at OSU SHS and BCHD. They also provide education and support about sexual health issues by conducting outreach to males in Benton County.

An external evaluator has conducted an on-going program evaluation of MARS. In FY 2003, MARS Outreach Workers conducted outreach to and taught over 1,500 high school and college students about sexual health issues. High school students that received the MARS educational sessions demonstrated a 39% increase in knowledge of sexual health issues and local resources. There was a 131% increase in high school males' intention to utilize local reproductive health services. In addition, the number of MARS appointments at OSU SHS and BCHD increased from 42 during FY2003 to 172 MARS appointments during FY2004. This marked increase in recruitment can be explained by targeted outreach conducted on campus by the MARS Outreach Workers, facilitated by the collaboration between BCHD and OSU SHS.

Recruitment and retention efforts for student involvement in MARS have been successful. Cross-discipline recruitment on campus has achieved academic background diversity among MARS workers. MARS student workers are paid a competitive wage and often receive internship credit. They are also provided with professional development and continuing education opportunities. Travel incentives motivate MARS workers, as they have presented their work at national conferences and have attended out-of-state conferences. Each MARS Outreach Worker is given autonomy and unique leadership responsibilities, yet works collaboratively on many projects. One key to recruitment and retention of MARS workers has been BCHD and OSU SHS's commitment to providing flexibility in work schedules, thus allowing MARS staff to balance work and school responsibilities. Most MARS student staff have worked with the program for approximately two years.

The challenges encountered implementing MARS have included 1) Lack of research-based male involvement models, 2) Training MARS workers, and 3) Scheduling. Since the male involvement field is relatively new and no “best practices” have been established for involving adolescent males in reproductive health issues, MARS has learned by trial and error the most effective ways to reach out to males. MARS workers are college students and no prior public health experience is required for employment; therefore, the training period for new employees is extensive. Finally, coordinating work and school schedules has also been challenging, since OSU student schedules change every trimester.

Since the inception of MARS in 2000, the linkage between BCHD and OSU has played a fundamental and critical role in the program's development and success. Both organizations have clearly benefited from the partnership. The numbers of males attending MARS appointments has increased as OSU SHS and at BCHD; OSU students have received academic credit and

professional experience in their work with MARS; and awareness of community and campus health services for males has increased. The partnership has also lead to increased funding for MARS. In 2003, MARS was one of 15 male involvement programs in the nation to secure five years of federal funding from the US Office of Population Affairs. This funding will help develop MARS into a model that can be replicated in other Oregon communities and around the country. MARS has also been presented at APHA in 2002 and 2004, and was one of 11 programs selected for presentation at the American Association for Colleges and University's Sumner Symposium in 2004. Locally, MARS was highlighted in the Oregon Governor's Action Agenda for Teen Pregnancy Prevention in 2002.