OHIO ATTORNEY GENERAL'S ANTI-BULLYING SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY REPORT

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Developed by the Institute for Human Services
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INTRODUCTION

In early 2013, Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine directed his Office to conduct a symposium on bullying. A planning committee was formed, and decided to model the symposium after the Foster Youth Symposium the Office conducted in 2012. That is, the morning would consist of speakers and a panel of experts who would articulate the nature of the problem and the afternoon would consist of separate focus group discussions on challenges and recommendations for responding to the bullying problem in Ohio.

The planning committee made recommendations regarding who should attend the symposium and the Attorney General invited those entities. Symposium participants included teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and superintendents from many school systems throughout Ohio, along with individuals from the Ohio Department of Education. Representatives from local law enforcement agencies, bullying prevention programs, and youth associated with several bullying prevention programs also attended the sessions.

The Attorney General's Office contracted with the Institute for Human Services to facilitate the focus group sessions and submit a report. This document summarizes those focus group discussions.

The Symposium was held on May 15, 2013. During the morning session, Rosalind Wiseman, internationally recognized expert, educator and author on the topic of bullying, stressed the importance of creating and sustaining social environments that respect the inherent dignity of each person, and honors diversity; gave practical examples of how teachers can quickly and effectively intervene to stop bullying incidents and assign meaningful consequences; and articulated the importance of recognizing the "messiness" of the bullying problem as a first step to schools and communities developing a coordinated approach to preventing and responding to bullying.

Deborah Temkin, PhD, with the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights spoke about the dilemmas involved in defining bullying and how currently accepted definitions can lead to under-reporting and ineffective responses to bullying. Specifically, defining bullying as "... aggressive behavior

...that involves a real or perceived power imbalance" that "... is repeated or has the potential to be repeated" (www.stopbullying.gov) may exclude incidents where it is difficult to recognize the power imbalance, especially because power imbalance may shift from one situation to the next. Additionally, the definition may exclude single incidents of bullying. Dr. Temkin also reviewed recent research regarding bullying and bullying programs; stressed the importance of changing social norms to improve school social climate so that all students can be actively involved in school life; and advised participants to ensure that services are provided to students who bully, because they are at risk of engaging in future violent behavior.

Following these two presentations a panel of experts discussed specific issues related to implementing bullying prevention and response programs. Panel members included John Campo, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at the Ohio State University; Jennifer Stoff, Deputy Director of the Washington D.C. Office of Human Rights; and Miriam Zeidman, Legal Counsel for the Anti-Defamation League, Midwest region. Discussion focused on several topics including the recognition that bullying is an aspect of human cruelty and must be addressed in the larger societal context; how the city of Washington D.C. developed a city-wide bullying prevention and response strategy; the benefits of enumerated law; and the importance of encouraging schools to report data on bullying in order to track the effectiveness of bullying programs.

In the afternoon, four adult focus groups and one student-only group addressed the following questions:

- What can we do to build community capacity to prevent bullying, intervene appropriately when it happens, and help communities respond when a significant bullying event occurs?
- How can we encourage reporting of bullying?
- What can we do to ensure that best-practice techniques for preventing, intervening, and reporting bullying are integrated into schools and other agencies/organizations that serve youth?
- What can we do to change the culture of our society so that bullying is not tolerated and so youth treat each other with respect?

• How can we address the specific needs of students who may be particularly susceptible to bullying (e.g. LGBT youth and students with disabilities or poor social skills) while recognizing that any student may bully or be bullied?

Following is a summary of focus group discussions including an explanation of the challenges related to each question and recommendations for possible solutions.

SUMMARY REPORT OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Issue #1: Building Community Capacity

Challenges

There is considerable focus on the bullying problem, especially with recent media coverage of several high-profile bullying incidents. The fact that the Attorney General convened the Bullying Symposium further attests to the importance of this issue.

Currently, resources for preventing and responding to bullying are "siloed" in various community service organizations, the schools, and law enforcement. Much of the work is coordinated to a minimum level, if at all; and knowledge about successful interventions is not routinely shared or made easily available.

Comprehensive coordination of prevention and response efforts, along with increased awareness, knowledge, and training are needed to effectively address the bullying problem.

Recommendations

1. Each community should develop a comprehensive, integrated community-wide approach to assess the nature and scope of the bullying problem in their communities, and to implement programs for preventing and responding to bullying. At least as much time and attention should be allocated to prevention activities as to response activities. The role and responsibility of each community organization should be established. Those organizations should develop and implement programming or services consistent with their role in bullying prevention and response. For example, Boys and Girls Clubs could engage youth in activities that expose them to diversity. Protocols for intra-agency collaboration should be developed and formalized through Memorandum of Understanding documents.

- 2. Youth should be routinely engaged in any and all efforts to prevent bullying and respond to the bullying problem. Their "first hand" knowledge of the issues is invaluable in designing effective programs.
- 3. Communities should build their capacity to both prevent and respond to bullying by utilizing tools, resources, and relationships that already exist. Many communities have task forces, coalitions and other types of collaborative arrangements that work on a variety of issues such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and child maltreatment. Communities should utilize these existing collaborative relationships, processes, networks, meetings and funding mechanisms to address the bullying problem. Additional funding should be made available, as needed.
- 4. Community wide training should be conducted to raise awareness of the issue, promote prevention efforts, encourage reporting, and to encourage community members to contribute their time and talent to bullying prevention and response programs. Targeted training should be provided to parents and teachers to help them develops skills for teaching children to engage in respectful interpersonal interactions; to value and respect diversity; how to respond when children have been bullied; and how to help children who have engaged in bullying behavior stop that behavior. This training could be conducted through PTOs, PTAs, or through other community service organizations.
- 5. Utilize prevention professionals to guide the development of evidence-based approaches for bullying prevention in schools and communities. Prevention activities should include strategies for developing and sustaining positive social climate in schools.
- 6. Utilize social workers and mental health professionals to help students resolve issues related to being bullied. They should also help students who have bullied others resolve issues that contributed to their bullying behavior, and help them become positive members of the school community.
- 7. Include persons from the technology and social media industry in developing effective responses to cyber bullying. For example, they could

provide guidance on the possibility and desirability of shutting down web sites; and could advise parents on being alert to the possibility of children engaging in cyber bullying or being victimized by cyber bullying. This industry should be involved in any community wide partnerships that address bullying.

Issue #2: Encouraging reporting of bullying

<u>Challenges</u>

It is likely that most bullying incidents are not reported by either students or school staff. There are several barriers to reporting:

- 1. Victims may fear re-victimization.
- 2. Student observers may fear loss of social status or friendships or being labeled as a "snitch"; they may fear retaliation. Alternately, they may feel guilty for not reporting. Choosing to report is fraught with dilemmas; students need considerable support from adults to do so.
- 3. Students and adults may not be confident that any positive outcome will result from their reporting. They may think that school staff will not take the report seriously, or that their efforts to resolve the situation will be ineffective. Unfortunately, these are often accurate assumptions.
- 4. School administrators may be embarrassed to report the incidence of bullying in their buildings because such knowledge could negatively affect their reputation in their local communities and among other school administrators. Or they may be reluctant to document bullying reports and their responses to those reports, because of the time involved in completing documentation.
- 5. Some adults deny the nature or size of the problem, minimize its effect, or think of it as a "rite of passage" or "boys being boys." They may believe they do not have enough "evidence" to make a report, or fear they may be sued.

- 6. Very few students are capable of intervening when bullying occurs, especially since, in most environments, there is little support for someone who intervenes.
- 7. It is sometimes difficult to recognize the subtle, insidious incidents of bullying, and witnesses may be unsure if a particular student interaction is bullying, a simple interpersonal conflict, or good-natured teasing.
- 8. The culture of the school environment may minimize the bullying problem or the importance of responding to bullying; or may tacitly condone it by not effectively addressing it.
- 9. School districts do not report all bullying incidents; they are required to report only those bullying incidents that result in disciplinary action. However, best practice methods of responding to bullying include the use of natural, educational consequences (work on a sincere apology, write a paper/teach a lesson on empathy, etc.) where the perpetrator is not isolated (suspended) but learns to be a positive member of the school community. These types of situations are not reported; therefore statewide data does not accurately reflect the number of bullying incidents that occur throughout the state.

Recommendations

- School staff should clearly communicate that bullying is harmful and will
 not be tolerated, and set clear expectations for student behavior. As one
 member of the student focus group said, "If the school makes their policy
 well-known, students will know what rules they must follow and how
 they are expected to behave."
- 2. School Resource Officers' role in responding to and documenting bullying has been very helpful. Schools should continue using their SROs for this purpose.
- 3. Procedures and expectations for reporting should be clearly communicated, and the reporting process should be easy and accessible to all (i.e.: school staff, students, parents). Every school should develop a system for reporting anonymously to decrease the fear of retribution.

- Students should be encouraged to report bullying to any staff member they are comfortable talking to.
- 4. Schools should clearly communicate that reporting is an act of caring, i.e.: to support the person who has been bullied as well as to help the person who bullied to stop that behavior. They should also teach students about a variety of ways to help the person who was bullied, such as supporting them with a few kind words.
- 5. School administration should take each report of bullying seriously, and should thoroughly, sensitively, and fairly respond to all reports of bullying. Parents of the child who was bullied should be provided with allowable information regarding the school's response. This should build confidence that reporting bullying will have positive outcomes.
- 6. All school staff should interrupt and stop bullying behavior while it is occurring. This should happen consistently throughout the school building. Doing so should instill confidence that bullying behavior will be addressed.
- 7. It is important to gather data on the number of bullying incidents in order to understand the scope of the problem and to establish a baseline for measuring the effectiveness of intervention efforts. However, it would also be helpful to gather data on the impact of intervention efforts, such as the degree to which staff training has improved teachers' capacity to support students who have been bullied.

Issue #3: Integrating Best Practice Techniques

Challenges

Numerous programs have been developed to prevent and respond to bullying. Some of these programs have been formally evaluated and proven effective, i.e.: "evidence-based," and are easily obtained from national organizations. Research has identified elements of various bullying prevention and response programs that are essential for successful programs (www.stopbullying.gov). Additionally, there are local programs that

apparently work well, but have not been funded to be evaluated and therefore have not been established as evidence-based practices.

There is one exception – there is a lack of adequate response to cyber bullying. Students and adults reported feeling quite helpless to address this issue. Social media presence is a significant aspect of student's social world, and participants in the youth group described this as "pretty dangerous" since damaging social media entries, regarding students as well as teachers, can spread extremely quickly. For example, in "crush sites" false rumors, sexually explicit and humiliating comments can be posted and then placed on Twitter. These postings are anonymous and untraceable. As one participant in the student group commented; "...It's ingenious how horrible it is."

It is important to note that some bullying programs have proven to be ineffective or damaging. For example, conflict management training programs are ineffective for bullying. These interventions are designed for persons of equal status to resolve their differences. The dynamic common in bullying, i.e.: a person of more power or authority (i.e.: social, emotional, physical superiority) deliberately hurting another (i.e.: socially, emotionally, or physically), is not resolved with conflict management. In fact, conflict management sessions can provide a venue for additional bullying.

School districts and communities throughout Ohio are widely divergent in their approach to preventing and responding to bullying. For example, a few schools have well established highly effective programs that are consistently implemented throughout the building. However, in other schools, efforts to prevent and respond to bullying are left to individual school staff, with only minimal support and training for these efforts. In these schools, individual teachers or staff members may respond effectively; however, without a comprehensive program, these schools cannot ensure that all bullying incidents are handled effectively.

Recommendations

- 1. Develop and implement a system for assessing the nature and scope of the bullying problem in individual communities and schools. Assessment information should be used to determine the types of interventions necessary for a particular school or community, or to tailor already-developed bullying programs for the specific school or community.
- 2. A clearinghouse for bullying prevention and response programs and supporting materials should be established and maintained at the state level. Programs should be reviewed and vetted prior to placing them in the clearinghouse, so that only the most proven programs are housed there. These materials should be made easily available to all communities and schools.
- 3. Effective models for engaging parents in bullying prevention and response activities should be identified and distributed among school systems.
- 4. Implementing effective bullying programs should be a collaborative effort among community leaders and organizations such as child serving agencies, law enforcement, and schools. Methods for preventing and responding to bullying behavior should be consistent, and well integrated throughout the community and school. It is critical that school administrators take a strong leadership role in promoting bulling programs, and that all school staff members work hard to implement the program. Bullying prevention and response programs should be multifaceted to address the complicated dynamics that contribute to bullying.
- 5. Students and parents should be involved in the development and implementation of bullying prevention and response programs. Their perspectives and involvement are essential in understanding the nature of the problem, and designing solutions specific to the school. Participants in the student focus group felt that student-led programs were most effective.

- 6. Individuals, organizations, and schools who have already implemented successful programs should be at the forefront of sharing that information with other communities and schools, and advising them on successful implementation strategies. A statewide system for this information sharing and advising should be established.
- 7. Data should be gathered at the state level regarding the incidents of bullying, and the effectiveness of bullying prevention and response programs, to provide data for decision making on program implementation.
- 8. Each school should evaluate the effectiveness of the bulling prevention and response programs they implement. This is especially recommended for programs developed by school staff.
- 9. Prevention programs should begin as early as possible, i.e.: in grade school; and parents should teach children, as early as preschool, that bullying is not acceptable.
- 10. Bullying intervention programs should include help for those who bully. There are various reasons why youth engage in bullying behavior, some of which stem from significant social or emotional issues such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, or severe problems at home. These youth need help to resolve those issues and successfully participate in the school community.
- 11. Significant efforts should be made to address the problem of cyberbullying. Students and parents should be informed about the serious harm caused by on-line bullying. Furthermore, representatives from various disciplines including law enforcement, prosecuting attorneys, and the social media industry should collaborate to find ways to prevent cyberbullying, quickly stop it once it has occurred, and prosecute offenders, when necessary. The Attorney General's office should consider convening a task force for this purpose.

Issue #4: Changing the Culture

Challenges

The problem of bullying, i.e.: stronger, more powerful individuals who deliberately harm those who are perceived as different or vulnerable, is endemic throughout society (i.e.: workplace harassment, hate crimes, domestic violence, some child abuse), not just in schools. Responding to the problem involves establishing and reinforcing behavioral standards and codes of conduct regarding protecting the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, and responding appropriately when those standards are violated.

Specific challenges include the following:

- 1. Defining bullying and determining the threshold for intervention is often unclear. While it is easy to agree on blatant examples of bullying, recognizing more subtle, insidious forms is more difficult. The experience of social and emotional bullying is often very subjective, making it difficult to decide when intervention is necessary.
- 2. The current focus of attention on bullying, and the inherent difficulty in clearly distinguishing some bullying from other forms of conflict or aggression has led some to believe that "every disagreement is considered bullying" and to minimize the importance of addressing the bullying problem.
- 3. Some students receive contradictory messages regarding whether bullying behavior is permissible. School staff members generally promote and encourage respectful, kind interactions among students and between students and staff. However in some schools, bullying behavior is not systematically addressed, which can be interpreted as tacit acceptance of that behavior. Furthermore, some students are exposed to bullying behavior at home including blatant disrespect and ridicule among family members; and domestic violence and child maltreatment which are, in essence, extreme forms of bullying.

- 4. Some parents are defensive about their children's bullying behavior, don't believe that their child would act cruelly towards another person, or minimize the impact on the victim and others. These parents may not partner with the school in resolving the problem. In fact, some allow the behavior to continue, and threaten school staff when they to engage parents in addressing the bullying behavior.
- 5. School administration and staff often refrain from establishing clear, firm expectations and procedures regarding preventing and responding to bullying because they are not aware of the nature or scope of the problem in their buildings; they have not prioritized attending to this problem; or they lack confidence or knowledge about how to intervene.
- 6. School administrators often feel their "hands are tied" with regard to cyber bullying. They believe, and are often advised by their attorneys, that they cannot punish students; and parents and students often argue "freedom of speech."

Recommendations

- Each community should implement a holistic, coordinated, comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to bullying. (See Issue #1: Building Community Capacity for more information on this issue.)
- 2. Likewise, each school district should develop a comprehensive coordinated approach to prevent bullying by establishing and maintaining a culture that supports respectful interpersonal interactions, values diversity, and upholds the inherent worth of every individual and group. Suggested strategies include:
 - a. Establish safe, nurturing environments in classrooms and throughout the building, i.e.: "make the classroom like a home" (according to a participant in the student focus group).
 - b. Model a straightforward, strengths-based approach to resolving conflicts and disagreements among school staff, and among school staff and students.

- c. Using inclusive curriculum. For example, the contributions of people from minority populations to American culture, science, government, etc. should be taught in American History classes.
- d. Clearly communicate that diversity is valued and honored. The physical school environment should clearly communicate valuing diversity within the student body. For example, hallways should include trophies and pictures for the full range of student activities (drama, music, debate team, etc.), not just sports.
- e. The Ohio State Department of Education should consider including a "grade" for social climate on school systems' "Report Cards" to encourage school systems to develop a welcoming, inclusive, respectful atmosphere in each of their buildings.
- 3. Each school system should develop a comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to bullying. Elements of the approach should include:
 - a. Communicating with parents and students regarding the definition of bullying (as distinguished from conflict and disagreements); procedures for reporting bullying; and how the school will respond to allegations of bullying.
 - b. Establishing easy-to-use procedures for reporting bullying, including anonymous reporting and the ability for any student to report bullying to any staff member they feel comfortable they feel comfortable talking to.
 - c. Establishing clear policies and procedures about immediately responding to bullying behavior. These should include methods for holding the person who bullied responsible for his/her actions and supporting the person who was bullied.
 - d. Establishing the expectation that school staff will intervene to stop bullying interactions as they occur. School staff should be trained in how to intervene, and supported when they do so.
 - e. Training school administrators on implementing a comprehensive program for preventing and responding to bullying.

- 4. Schools should be provided with "tool kits." School personnel are busy, with multiple priorities and pressures. Providing them with tool kits on proven methods for preventing and responding to bullying could help them address the issue. Tool kits should include information on establishing policies and procedures, materials to be used, and training for school staff.
- 5. Schools and communities should engage the media in reporting on interventions that have had positive impacts on the bullying problem.

Issue #5: Addressing the needs of groups who may be especially vulnerable to bullying

<u>Challenges</u>

There is considerable debate in the field as to the benefits of enumerated laws. These laws list examples of groups which have been targeted for bullying and hate crimes. Enumerated laws can be used to educate people that harassment of individuals belonging to one of these groups is a federal crime, and that there is legal recourse for victims. As one focus group member said, "People need to know that bullying on the basis of enumerated categories (i.e.: race, gender, and disability) may violate federal anti-discrimination laws and may be a hate crime. Calling the problem what it is, a violation of law, raises its importance."

However by enumerating certain groups, some people may assume that only those groups are subject to bullying, harassment, or hate crimes. In reality, anyone can be a target of bullying, because the critical dynamic in bullying is the perpetrator's abusive use of social status and power, not the victim's membership of a certain group. The effects of bullying can have serious, lasting social and emotional impact on anyone who has been bullied.

Recommendations

Most focus group members thought that enumeration is helpful for educational purposes, and to provide legal recourse for affected individuals. It is critical however, for enumerated law and policy to include the phrase, "including, but not limited to..." when referring to targeted groups, to ensure that people who are not members of those groups are also protected under the law.

However, more importantly, considerable effort should be made to help students appreciate differences among people and behave respectfully to all individuals; and to develop systems for responding effectively when students bully, regardless of whether the victim was a member of a specific group that is enumerated in federal law. See recommendations related to these issues in Item #4: Changing the Culture.