Seeking Safety, Seeking New Futures

An innovative, evidence-based program reflects the Clinic’s commitment to teens suffering trauma, including boys and young men of color.

Eric Bailey grew up in South L.A., so he knows the kinds of stresses and trauma that many area teens are exposed to from a very young age.

That awareness—and a desire to make a difference—inspired him to join the Seeking Safety team at the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic to help teens experiencing trauma gain coping skills and improve their futures. “We’re essentially telling each teen, ‘You’re not alone. We’re available if you need us. This isn’t a 9-5 job for us,’” says Bailey.

The evidence-based program, launched in 2012/2013, represents a renewed effort by the Clinic to reduce barriers to treatment faced by boys and young men of color. Studies show that young males in low-income communities and communities of color are the hardest hit of any group. They have the lowest life expectancy rates, highest unemployment rates, fewest high school and college graduates, and one of the highest homicide rates.*

The Seeking Safety team, all Bachelor-level professionals, includes the demographic the Clinic wants to impact: young, Latino, African American, and male. Each team member brings a background in such trauma-related issues as domestic violence, substance abuse, and family dynamics.

Working in local high schools, the team spreads the word about Seeking Safety’s proven strategies among teachers, counselors, social workers, and parents. “Our young people deal with very high rates of gang and community violence directly,” says Eric Inouye, Clinic Community Access Coordinator. “School is a safe, positive place for most of them, which makes it the perfect setting for this program.”

Seeking Safety is designed to help clients obtain safety from trauma, substance abuse, or post-traumatic stress syndrome. Its principles recognize the impact of long-standing trauma, but focus on here and now—an emphasis that works with the teens the Clinic seeks to help.

The team members have teens sign contracts, develop plans of action, role play positive behaviors, and draw up “safe lists” of friends and family to contact in a crisis. “Seeking Safety’s coping techniques are really useful,” says team member Ernie Limon. “Often, teens need help controlling their anger or pain, or the alternative can be doing harm to themselves or others.”

These techniques are flexible enough to adapt to different situations, “so our clients feel empowered,” says Bill Valde Cifuentes. Fellow team member Jeremy Atterman agrees. As teens gain more self-confidence in facing the future, “they view themselves differently,” he says.

Positive coping skills often zero in on the teen’s interests. “I try to gauge what each kid is into, and show how he or she might use that interest to cope better with negative encounters,” says team member Johnny Morataya. In one recent example, he guided 16-year-old Diego** in combining his love of music with deep breathing techniques to reduce stress.

As a result, the Seeking Safety team has seen successes—in teens who stop injuring themselves, de-escalate their outbursts, and improve their grades or family relationships. The goal, says Porcayo-Morales: “We all want to help kids reach safety.”

* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
**Client name changed for confidentiality.