

Drugs, Sex, HIV: Programs Teach At-Risk Urban Girls How to Play it Safe

High school phase of health risk prevention program for girls

SUMMARY

The Freedom Foundation of New Jersey Inc., West Orange, N.J., carried out three programs encouraging girls in inner-city Newark, N.J., to abstain from illegal drugs and sexual relations.

Newark has one of the highest per-capita female-HIV-infection rates in the United States, with AIDS the leading cause of death among young black women of childbearing age.

The three programs, Best Friends, Teen Challenge, and Diamond Girls, operated through the Newark school system and were organized by Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit organization that promotes the health and well-being of youth.

The project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) *New Jersey Health Initiatives* national program (for more information see Program Results).

Key Results

Best Friends offers girls at risk for unwanted pregnancies and HIV infection:

- A range of classroom sessions.
- Weekly mentoring meetings with school system volunteers.
- Other structured activities designed to foster self-esteem, supportive relationships, and positive peer pressure.
- Information about sexuality and substance abuse, and career and recreational opportunities.

During the first grant (1993–1996):

• Best Friends had 365 sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade participants, with an average dropout rate of 6 percent (22 girls).

The first grant also helped support an ongoing program, Teen Challenge, through which locally trained college students and youth counselors offered abstinence-based drug and

HIV-prevention seminars to Newark students from sixth grade through high school as well as to their parents and teachers.

- By 1996, Teen Challenge was presented to more than 3,500 sixth-grade students and teachers (nearly the entire sixth-grade population) in the Newark school system.
- By 1998, more than 27,000 students, parents, and teachers in Newark had been presented this program.

Two other RWJF grants piloted and expanded Best Friends' high school counterpart, Diamond Girls, which offered twice-monthly sessions on subjects such as friendship, trust, and decision-making and the importance of completing high school and avoiding substance abuse.

It also offered mentoring and career and recreational opportunities.

• By 1999, there were 98 active participants in the Diamond Girls program—87 of whom had been enrollees from the Best Friends program.

Funding

The first RWJF grant, which took place between 1993 and 1996, helped to initiate and expand Best Friends in Newark, N.J., a program aimed at girls in sixth grade through middle school.

RWJF supported the program with three grants that totaled \$243,260 between June 1993 and February 1999.

Afterward

RWJF continued to support the Diamond Girls program in Newark through six additional \$47,500 grants (ID#s 039037, 039628, 043587, 046993, 049790, 052680) from May 2000 through December 2006, for a total of \$285,000. This support was outside of the *New Jersey Health Initiative*.

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