

Youth-led sexual health summit a virtual success for South LA youth and young adults

After a six-month delay caused by the pandemic, Spring into Love, the youth-led sexual and reproductive health conference, went virtual over two consecutive Saturdays in October 2020. Redubbed Spring into Love: Fall Edition, the conference reeled in 90 participants out of 150 registrations from 10 am – Noon on October 17th and 24th.

“Bringing young people virtually together on a Saturday morning for an extracurricular activity to learn about sexual and reproductive health is no small feat. But the CDC estimates that 1 in 5 people in the U.S have an STD. So, it is crucial that we do what we can to help reduce STDs in our community,” says Adolescent Health Program Manager Marina Quintanilla, Essential Access Health. “Although it’s a lot to ask for a young person to give up their Saturday mornings, what makes this conference unique is that it’s entirely planned and led by youth—for youth.”

One attendee reinforced the importance of a conference led by youth, stating they liked “that the hosts were my age and I felt comfortable...”

Spring into Love (SIL) is an annual conference that is organized by youth interns supported by Essential Access Health for WeCanStopSTDsLA. The main purpose of the conference is to: 1) increase knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and sexual and reproductive health; 2) normalize conversation around these issues and; 3) help reduce the rates and cases of STDs in South LA.

In 2018, the most recent year for which we have full data, there were nearly 100,000 cases of curable STDs in LA County, of which 42% were in young people ages 15-24.¹ In South LA, gonorrhea rates are 7.4 times higher among African American women ages 15-24 as compared to white women of the same age in the same area.² Over ¼ of all chlamydia and gonorrhea cases in LA County are found in South LA (Supervisory District 2).² There are many reasons for this disparity, but STDs have often lacked the attention and funding resources by a large measure.

Left untreated, STDs can leave a lasting impact on an entire generation—causing infertility, pregnancy complications, cervical cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease, birth defects, and an up to 5-fold increased risk of HIV transmission.³

Interns received training in sexual and reproductive health using a peer-led model led by some previous SIL interns. The SIL Fall Edition interns worked for over a year, initially planning the in-person event originally scheduled for April 2020. When the pandemic forced a change of plans, the eight interns switched gears, too, and began making plans for the virtual event. Hailing from high schools around South Los Angeles, each intern took part in one of three subcommittees (logistics, communications or workshops/resources).

“What made SIL special was the amount of work that was put in to making it virtual while trying to make it as normal as possible. We modeled after the in-person event with an opening, break and then going off to the workshops, so that made it easy and familiar to navigate in the virtual world,” says Kat Mancía, lead SIL intern.

¹ Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Division of HIV and STD Programs, unpublished data

² Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2017 data

³ National Coalition of STD Directors handout, https://www.ncsddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/STD-101_NCSDD-STD-Handout-1.3-DIGITAL-1.pdf

Last year's 8th Annual Spring into Love: Fall Edition featured a DJ, virtual photobooth, resource fair/scavenger hunt and twelve workshops, covering healthy relationships, safer sex, self-love and youth rights. SIL provides a safe space for youth to learn from each other on topics that are not always discussed in their school curricula.

One attendee noted: "I liked how comfortable everyone was with talking about sex, it's refreshing as opposed to health classes where teachers are uneasy and wary of talking and getting into specifics about sex."

One of the most popular workshops, Masturbation Nation, was taught for the first time and put on by none other than the SIL interns themselves. In total, SIL workshops featured 34 youth presenters ages 14-23 from the LA Trust Children's Health, Black Women for Wellness, East Los Angeles Women's Center, YWCA Greater of LA, Dominguez High School, Teen Line, ACLU SoCal, Women's Leadership Project, and SIL Interns.

Youth presenters received gift cards as did select participants, chosen by the presenters in each workshop. Thanks to Keeping it Real Together project, many more gift cards were made available this year for participating in certain conference activities, such as social media engagement and an online scavenger hunt of local resources. For those who attended both Saturdays and submitted an evaluation, their names were entered into a raffle for a chance to win higher-end prizes such as a Nintendo Switch, iPad mini, Apple watch and AirPods, and Bluetooth speakers.

Recruitment for the next cohort of SIL interns will begin in February/March 2021 in preparation for a repeat virtual performance of Spring into Love: Fall Edition 2021.

About Essential Access Health

Essential Access Health achieves its mission through an umbrella of programs and services including clinic support initiatives, advanced clinical research, provider training, and advocacy and public awareness campaigns and initiatives. As the administrator of California's Title X federal family planning program – the largest Title X system in the nation - Essential Access Health supports the delivery of core family planning and related preventive health services for low-income and uninsured patients across the state. Essential Access Health's impact reaches beyond the state of California and extends throughout the country. With offices in Northern and Southern California, our dedicated staff of 60 have a wide range of expertise in the field of sexual and reproductive health – as researchers, trainers, health care leaders, and more.

About WeCanStopSTDsLA

Since 2012, WeCanStopSTDsLA, a coalition of individuals and organizations who live, play, work, serve and worship in the South LA, East LA and Antelope Valley areas of LA County, has worked towards reducing STDs among youth and young adults. The coalition was formed in 2011 in response to disproportionately high STD rates among African American and Latino youth and young adults in South LA, with support from then LAC Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas' office and the LA County Department of Public Health. The Community Advisory Coalition (CAC), made up over sixty partner entities who represent upwards of 300 individuals inclusive of residents, community service providers, public health leadership, community and faith-based organizations with backbone support from Coachman Moore & Associates, Inc., guides the coalition's work.

For more information about 2020 Spring into Love Fall Edition:

https://www.wecanstopstdsla.org/spring_into_love_fall_edition_2020