

1A.5. Guiding Young Latin American Reproductive Health Leaders to Productive Adulthood

Suzanne Petroni, The Summit Foundation; **Esther Tahir**, International Health Programs; **Denise Dunning**, International Health Programs; **Josie Ramos**, International Health Programs
E-mail: spetroni@summitfdn.org

Background/Significance: International Health Programs (IHP) of the Public Health Institute partners with the Summit Foundation to implement the Youth Leadership in Sexual and Reproductive Health Program (GOJoven), developing a cadre of young leaders advancing adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) in Guatemala, Honduras, Belize and Mexico.

Responding to increasing rates of HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy in Central America and Mexico, IHP and the Summit Foundation have collaborated in the design and implementation of GOJoven, training a diverse range of young leaders ages 18-30 to advance ASRH. Through the program, IHP has thus far built the capacity of 72 youth leaders, called Summit Fellows, to develop the vision, skills, knowledge and commitment to advance sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, programs and policies for adolescents and youth throughout the region.

Intervention/Activity Tested: Twenty Summit Fellows each year participate in four intensive quarterly trainings (for a total of 25 days) on issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights and leadership development. Through these interactive workshops, Summit Fellows strengthen their knowledge, skills and effectiveness in a broad range of key areas, including: teambuilding, networking and alliance building, media relations, public speaking, advocacy, proposal development, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning and conflict resolution. Since the Program's inception in 2004, 72 young men and women have participated in GOJoven, thereby learning to better advance ASRH in their communities, strengthen institutional commitment to regional ASRH needs, and engage in national level advocacy.

The program emphasizes that as leaders, Fellows not only have the responsibility to develop their strengths, but also to utilize their capacity to create change in their communities, institutions and countries for the benefit of adolescents and youth. Program staff train and coach Fellows to develop and implement Leadership Action Plans, country-based projects that serve to improve youth SRH and rights through programmatic, service and policy interventions in their respective institutions and communities.

Methodology: In recruiting Summit Fellows, the GOJoven Resource Team selects young leaders who are able to influence diverse areas of society, including through the political, education, health, non-governmental, police, media and environmental sectors. The Program then involves stakeholders from these various sectors, as well as the Fellows themselves, in measuring impact through surveys, participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews. Fellows analyze their own leadership competencies and needs through assessment tools and experiential exercises that enable them to reflect on how GOJoven has impacted them as leaders, as well as their institutions. To examine broader program impacts at local and national levels, the Fellows also submit interim and final reports on their Leadership Action Plans.

Findings: Summit Fellows consistently report that GOJoven has transformed their personal and professional lives. The increased knowledge, skills and self-confidence they gain through the program enables them to set and accomplish greater goals, interact with adults in positions of authority, address and overcome personal challenges, and of course, concretely promote youth sexual and reproductive health. Many Fellows come to recognize themselves as change agents and implement work to empower other youth. Additionally, program participation has strengthened Fellows' personal commitment to SRH work by instilling in them a responsibility to advance the SRH of their peers in their communities and countries.

Specifically, through the Program, GOJoven Fellows have:

- Raised the awareness of SRH among adolescents and local communities
- Empowered youth from a diverse range of populations, including indigenous, marginalized and rural youth
- Trained sex workers to advocate for their SRH rights
- Implemented peer-to-peer education programs, health fairs, and media programs
- Trained organizational colleagues on ASRH
- Integrated attention to ASRH into their respective institutions' operational and strategic plans
- Influenced local and national youth development, SRH and sexuality education policy
- Built institutional awareness and capacity in the area of ASRH

Fellows have cumulatively provided SRH and leadership training and education to over 10,000 adolescents and hundreds of organizations, and the vast majority of program graduates continue working directly in SRH or actively contributing to enhancing adolescent SRH across the region.

Lessons Learned: Summit Fellows' unique knowledge and commitment to their communities directly informs the design and implementation of their work, including the Leadership Action Plans, resulting in successful and creative interventions to improve ASRH in their communities and countries. Through GOJoven, Summit Fellows develop greater knowledge of and a deepened dedication to a broad range of SRH issues, and strengthen their capacity in key areas such as individual and collaborative leadership, program planning and implementation, teamwork, negotiation and conflict resolution that enables them to actively advance the creation of programs, services, and policies at local, national and regional levels.

Highly participatory, youth-centered programs such as GOJoven strengthen the capacity of young leaders and can result in transitions to productive adulthood with increased commitment and long-term sustainability of improvements in adolescent sexual and reproductive health.