

Everyday, Colorado youth face decisions about their lives. These decisions require knowledge and skills about a variety of topics—including sexual health. How they deal with challenges, how they set goals and achieve success, and how they talk with their families about their decisions are among the complex set of questions that young people ask and answer each day—all of which set the stage for their health and success as adults.

Youth Sexual Health in Colorado: A Call to Action offers health, educational, and economic strategies to help communities **work in partnership with youth** as they navigate the journey through adolescence. Through open dialogue, complete and accurate sexuality education, and access to affordable resources and confidential services, young Coloradans can achieve successful health outcomes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YOUTH SEXUAL HEALTH IN COLORADO: A CALL TO ACTION

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

What is Youth Sexual Health?

Sexual health is attained though the development of skills that support lifelong physical, emotional, mental and social well-being. In addition to information about human anatomy and physiology, sexual health includes knowledge and skills related to:

- decision-making and goal-setting about when and if to have a family;
- creating safe relationships;
- developing self-acceptance and a positive identity; and
- communicating with health professionals, partners and families.

Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and relationships, and includes the possibility of having safe and wanted sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.[1]

How Colorado Measures Up

Colorado has seen significant improvements in youth sexual health over the last decade – teen birth rates have declined, sexual activity among youth is slightly below the national average, and more youth are using contraception when they do have sex.[2] However, condom use has been inconsistent, sexual violence is on the rise and rates of Chlamydia are increasing.[2]

Supporting Youth Sexual Health

All Colorado youth deserve the right to access the information, resources and services they need to make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health. Young people must be allowed to develop hopes and dreams for their future, have goals to work toward, and receive support and guidance from trusted adults.

Questions that Guided the Call to Action

- How can all youth have healthy, safe relationships and make decisions that are in line with their values?
- How does a community come together to prevent unplanned teen pregnancy and decrease the risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, among youth?
- How can all youth have access to condoms and birth control and know how to use them?
- Do all youth feel supported by their community, family, friends, and schools?
- What needs to be in place so that all youth participate in educational and career opportunities that reflect their hopes and dreams?

In order to answer these questions, the Call to Action provides strategies for communities to achieve the following:

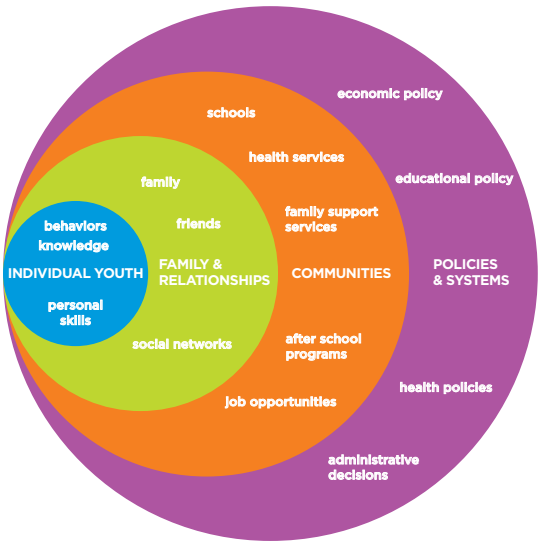
- decrease rates of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV;
- decrease rates of unintended teen pregnancy;
- decrease sexual assault and dating violence; and
- increase participation by youth in educational and career opportunities.

Strategies and Action Planning

The *Call to Action* provides strategies to communities that impact all levels of a young person's environment. These levels, also called "spheres of influence," reflect how an individual young person is impacted and informed by family and relationships, communities, and policies and systems. Youth can make healthy and informed decisions about their lives and future when each sphere properly responds to the needs of youth. Here are some key action steps that communities can take to make this happen:

- Engage youth in decision-making and each step of program planning and implementation. Ask them what *they* want and need to make healthy, responsible choices.

Spheres of Influence



- Build and strengthen collaborations among schools, youth, parents, faith communities, service providers and local decision-makers to promote youth sexual health and related community resources.
- Take advantage of "teachable moments" to discuss sexual health.
- Help youth graduate and envision a life beyond high school by providing equitable educational and career options.
- Find out if schools in the community participate in the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey as a way to learn more about the behaviors of youth.
- Advocate for alignment between local curricula and Colorado's Healthy Youth Act in every Colorado school district.



Successfully Planning and Implementing Community Programs

Communities can select effective programs and services by assessing which ones are evidence-based and medically accurate, which are going to successfully help youth reach health goals, and which are best at addressing the needs of the youth in the community. The sustainability and effectiveness of programs depend on proper planning, thoughtful implementation and thorough evaluation.[64] The *Call to Action* outlines a simple process that will help diverse Colorado communities develop goals based on evidence and select programs and interventions that align with their community's unique needs.

Please visit www.colorado9to25.org to view the full report, including information about the citations and a comprehensive appendix.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment