

Katie Brown Educational Program
Testimony for Congressional Hearing on Domestic Violence Prevention
June 3, 2011

First, I want to thank Senator Whitehouse for hosting this hearing regarding the prevention of teen dating violence and the Violence Against Women Act. I write as the Executive Director of the Katie Brown Educational Program, a relationship violence prevention program described in greater detail below. I feel privileged to provide information about our program and the importance of prevention programs in addressing, and eventually ending, domestic and teen dating violence.

Before I describe KBEP, I want to share my own perspective on the prevention of domestic and teen dating violence to give context to the rest of my testimony. For fifteen years, I have worked with victims of domestic violence and their children, including teen victims of dating violence and sexual assault. I have seen the profound impact of such violence, working with victims in shelter, hospital, and community based settings. This career path has been extremely challenging and rewarding, and I have learned so much from providing crisis and ongoing support to victims of violence. While this intervention is of utmost importance to help victims heal, it does not address the root of the problem or reduce the prevalence of such violence. I often found myself thinking about an individual client and what might have been different for them if someone had taught or modeled for them what it means to have a healthy relationship. If this person had some education when they were younger about protecting themselves from an abusive relationship, what would have been different about their life? Or, if someone had taught a young person that dealing with conflict through violence is not okay, would they make different choices? What I kept coming back to was the thought that youth need information and education about how to have healthy relationships that are free from violence. Too many youth are not prepared with this vital information, and are not able to recognize the warning signs of an abusive relationship or refrain from perpetrating violence themselves. This is what led me to prevention work and the Katie Brown Educational Program, which exemplifies for me the important work that needs to be done to help young people navigate their relationships without violence.

The Katie Brown Educational Program is a non-profit educational organization that was formed in 2001 to promote respectful relationships by teaching alternatives to relationship violence. Our program is named after a young woman from Barrington who was only 20 years old when she was killed by her dating partner. In the aftermath of her death, friends of the Brown family worked with an area domestic violence service provider to conceptualize a program that would give young people the skills to prevent such a thing from happening to any other young person. We do this work to honor Katie's life, as well as honor anyone who has been impacted by relationship violence.

KBEP has developed an innovative relationship violence prevention curriculum that our Educators teach to fifth grade through high school students, as well as teenagers and adults in non-traditional settings such as group homes, drug courts, and correctional facilities. In traditional classroom settings, the age-appropriate curriculum is typically presented over four or

five consecutive hour-long sessions. The first day of all grades addresses the different types of violence in relationships, as well as the role of power and control as a factor in unhealthy relationships. The subsequent sessions for each grade combine discussion and hands-on activities that center on a common theme for each grade level, and all reinforce the overarching themes of accountability, respect, and rights in relationships. Our goal is to teach youth information and skills they can use to make healthy decisions in all of their relationships, which is why we describe ourselves as a relationship violence prevention program instead of specifying dating violence or bullying, although both are addressed at length in the curriculum. Each grade's curriculum also includes information about the use of technology to perpetrate violence, with examples of behaviors such as texting, instant messaging, and use of social networking to be hurtful to a peer or dating partner. To date, the KBEP has educated over 45,000 students in fifth grade through high school in communities throughout Southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

The need for quality prevention programming that addresses violence in youth relationships has been demonstrated repeatedly, on both national and local levels. On a national level, 55% of students between the ages of eight and eleven report that bullying is a "big problem" for people their age, and 74% of students of the same age report that they get teased or bullied at school (www.talkingwithkids.org/violence). Like bullying, dating violence affects an alarming number of our youth. According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, approximately one in three adolescent girls in the United States is a victim of physical, emotional or verbal abuse from a dating partner -- a figure that far exceeds victimization rates for other types of violence affecting youth. We at KBEP strongly embrace the belief that early and frequent education about preventing violence is incredibly effective and worthwhile. This belief has been reinforced by a 2007 study from the CDC on the effectiveness of universal school-based programs for the prevention of violent and aggressive behavior. As the report noted, "All school antiviolence program strategies (e.g., informational cognitive/affective, and social skills building) were associated with a reduction in violent behavior. All program foci (e.g., disruptive or antisocial behavior, bullying or dating violence) similarly were associated with reduced violent behavior". The study then went on to quantify economic impact of such programming, including costs of providing the program and benefits of decreased tax dollars spent on criminal justice and healthcare. In terms of cost-benefit ratio, a benefit of \$3.14 for every dollar spent on prevention was noted.

The Katie Brown Educational Program provides relationship violence prevention programming to youth in area schools that closely mirrors the models examined in the above study. Our interactive curriculum addresses a range of age-appropriate topics related to healthy relationships. These topics include, but are not limited to: the types of violence found in relationships, standing up for yourself vs. fighting back, personal power and self esteem, respecting personal boundaries, healthy expression of anger, qualities of healthy friendships, expectations of dating relationships, warning signs of an abusive relationship, conflict resolution, stereotypes, and the cycle of violence. The response from students is overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by their responses on post-tests given at the end of the program. As one Providence student noted on their post-test, "The most important thing I learned was the actual definition of respect... I really must work on that."

KBEP is a universal prevention program, serving all youth regardless of socioeconomic background, history, or perceived risk of being involved in an abusive relationship. Given that, it is our strong belief that all youth need and can benefit from programming that teaches skills and techniques to deal with violence in relationships, as all children are at risk of experience this dynamic at some point in their lives. It is our hope that students will utilize the information and skills gained through participation in the program to manage anger and conflict without violence, recognize the warning signs of an abusive relationship, and advocate for their needs while also respecting the needs of others. The ultimate objective is to reduce, and eventually eliminate, violence in youth relationships.

We know that KBEP is having an impact on area youth, as evidenced by surveys administered to all program participants. All students complete pre- and post-tests designed to measure changes in beliefs and attitudes related to violence in relationships. The pre- and post-tests include both quantitative and qualitative questions, and were revised this past summer to reflect the changes and updates in our curriculum. Our short term goal is to demonstrate a shift in attitudes and thinking upon post-test at the completion of the program. While each grade's curriculum is unique, there are some overall themes that run through the entire program and that are measurable via our post-tests. These include demonstrating an increased understanding of the types of violence found in relationships, a change in social norms/acceptance of violence in relationships, improved self esteem, and increase ability to regulate emotions such as anger. In addition to these themes, each grade's pre- and post-tests measure outcomes specific to the content of the curriculum for that grade. KBEP is working with researchers from Bradley Hasbro Children's Research Center to compile and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data. KBEP also looks at students' own measurement of their learning. For example, in the 2009-2010 school year, 94% of participating high school students agreed that KBEP made them more aware of the warning signs of unhealthy relationships, 92% agreed that they felt better prepared to make healthy choices about relationships, and 90% agreed that they were willing to change some of their ideas in order to have healthier relationships. Ninety two percent of participating 5th graders agreed with the statement, "I feel like I can now stick up for myself without hurting anyone".

As mentioned before, the CDC has published a report that clearly identifies the worth of universal prevention programs that focus on education and skill building to address youth violence, including the issues of dating violence and bullying. This report recommended programs whose models are very similar to that offered by KBEP. The report ends with the following statement, "U.S. schools provide a critical opportunity for changing societal behavior... this opportunity is difficult to overestimate. The potential benefits of improved school function alone are notable. The broader and longer term benefits in terms of reduced delinquency and antisocial behavior are yet more substantial. Universal school-based violence prevention programs represent an important means of reducing violent and aggressive behavior in the United States".

We have come a long way in our understanding of domestic and teen dating violence as public health issues. It is also imperative that we understand violence as an education issue as well, and

not just because school settings provide an important venue for prevention programs, as mentioned above. A recent study published by the CDC indicated an increase in the prevalence of dating violence as grades in school became poorer, with the prevalence lowest among adolescents earning mostly A's and highest among those earning mostly C's, D's, and F's. The CDC fact sheet about the impact of dating violence on success in school also noted that at-risk middle and high school students' perceptions of danger at school can negatively influence their confidence in their ability to meet school-related demands and challenges. We know anecdotally that when young people feel unsafe with a dating partner, it is a barrier to focusing their energy on academic success. In my previous positions working with adults, adolescents and children impacted by domestic and dating violence, I heard countless times about young people distracted at school because of intrusive fearful thoughts about their abusive partner or constant texts and messages from their partner throughout the school day. The availability and use of technology among youth creates a situation that is increasingly difficult for school settings. Teens have instant and constant access to each other, even when they are supposed to concentrating on their classroom work. This constant communication is particularly harmful in a relationship that is abusive, giving the abuser countless opportunities to harass and demand attention from a dating partner. It is extremely difficult for a young person to focus on academics when they are worried about responding to their abuser or the consequences of their response. There have also been too many news reports of a hostile school environment for a student after a dating partner (or peer) distributes hurtful information or pictures about a student through social networking sites or cell phones. The ability to make issues in an individual relationship the business of an entire peer/school community has been greatly facilitated through technology, making it that much more difficult for a young person to "escape" abusive behaviors and focus on academics. Given the national focus on educational reform and academic success, it is clear that addressing violence that impacts youth is a key element allowing for academic progress.

In recent months, much attention has been given to the issue of bullying, both in terms of prevention and response. Schools are struggling with how to reduce the impact of bullying on students and the school environment. As my colleagues and I continue to emphasize whenever possible, there is a great deal of overlap between the dynamics of violence in a peer relationship and violence in a dating relationship. The components of both issues can be remarkably similar: both involve one member of the relationship using power and control to cause hurt and fear in the other, both impact the health and well being of the victim, and the availability of technology has exacerbated both dynamics. Both have significant impact on school settings and academic success, for the same reasons outlined above. The negative impact is not isolated to the victimized child/adolescent. The CDC fact sheet quoted above also notes the following:

- Witnessing violence has been associated with decreased school attendance and academic performance
- Adolescents who report witnessing and experiencing violence may internalize these experiences or act out as a result – leading to both depression and behavior and emotional issues
- Teens who are physically and verbally aggressive in the classroom may have a negative impact on the education of their classmates by diverting their teachers from teaching and reducing the amount of time students are engaged in learning

- Approximately one in four teens (7th through 12th graders) agreed that the threat of violence at their school interfered with their teacher's effectiveness, disrupting their learning.

While these statements were on a fact sheet about the impact of dating violence on school settings, all the above statements would also apply to the dynamic of bullying, or peer violence. This speaks to thinking about dating violence and bullying/peer violence not as two separate issues, but as a continuum of behaviors that need to be addressed to ensure the health, well-being, and academic success of our youth. Too often, these issues are looked at as distinct phenomenon, exemplified by local schools often having separate policies that address bullying and dating violence. This can be confusing and challenging for school administrators. Additionally, local and national prevention models most often focus on one or the other, as opposed to the continuum of behaviors that constitute relationship violence. KBEP is committed to addressing this continuum, with the strong belief that teaching a variety of skills related to healthy communication and expression of feelings will help youth be safe in all relationships, whether it be with a peer or dating partner. At the core of these issues is the need to teach young people about healthy relationships, and that violence is more than just physical assaults. We need to teach youth that it is never okay to say hurtful things about someone's appearance, post a rumor about someone on a social networking site, work to isolate someone by turning others against them, destroy someone's possessions, or threaten to disclose someone's personal information – no matter whether it is a peer or dating partner. We also need to teach youth that they deserve to be treated with respect, and that this respect should be a part of all of their relationships – no matter whether it is a peer or dating partner. We should be teaching youth to think critically about their relationships and their own behaviors, challenge them to examine stereotypes and how they influence their perceptions of themselves, peers and dating partners. It is critical that we give them the skills and information they need to examine their relationships and their own behaviors, determine what is healthy and what is not, and hopefully, make changes that will make their relationships safer. To sum it up, we need to focus more of our attention and resources on teaching youth about healthy relationships, or we will have to continue to respond to repeated incidents of dating violence and bullying in our schools and communities.

An example from our own curriculum that has broad reaching impact is as following. Our seventh grade curriculum includes an activity about conflict resolution. After a brainstorming session about what students think of when they hear the word conflict, our Educator helps students make a distinction between positive and negative aspects and outcomes of conflict. The Educator then leads them to a discussion about how conflict is not always negative, and is, in fact, a completely normal part of any relationship. Instead of the conflict being negative, our choices on how we handle conflict will determine whether the experience is positive or negative. The Educator then explores with the students three different responses to conflict – aggressive, passive and assertive. The students discuss what those responses look and sound like, and then create skits demonstrating the different responses to a variety of conflict scenarios. The goal is to have students better understand that conflict does not need to be avoided, but can be dealt with assertively, meaning that one can stand up for themselves while also respecting the rights and feelings of another person. When students understand and practice this skill, it will help them make healthy decisions in all of their relationships.

In summary, in order to see a reduction in domestic and teen dating violence, it is imperative that we address these issues at their roots. Children do not spontaneously know how to have respectful relationships – they must be taught. They must be taught both how to recognize the warning signs and protect themselves from abusive relationships, and they must also be taught that it is their responsibility to refrain from perpetrating violence against others. We need to teach children how to stand up for their own rights while also respecting the rights of others, and we need to help children give and expect respect in all of their relationships. This is what will bring a reduction in relationship violence, changing beliefs and attitudes about the role of violence in relationships, and helping youth develop healthy expectations of peers and dating partners.

On April 4th, 2011, Vice President Joe Biden spoke at the University of New Hampshire about the responsibility of colleges and universities in the prevention of sexual violence. He picked UNH as the venue for this speech because it is the home of a model program to address sexual violence on campus – SHARPP, or the Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program. He was introduced by UNH senior and SHARPP volunteer Sara Jane Bibeau, who is also a former KBEP intern. In his remarks, Vice President Biden spoke passionately about not just responding to victims, but working to prevent such violence so that there are no more victims. He summed up his thoughts with the following statement: “Really, changing attitudes is what we need to do most. Folks, if we are going to end violence, not reduce, but end it, we are going to have to change attitudes. That is the core of the problem.” It is our hope that more and more people will work together to do just that, change attitudes about violence and build a community where violence is simply not acceptable or tolerated.