



## **Background Information And Connection to Sexual Assault Prevention**

### **About the Program:**

Athletes As Leaders is a program for high school athletes on girls' sports teams. The program aims to empower female-identified youth to take an active role in promoting healthy relationships and ending sexual violence. It is based on research and best practices in the field of sexual assault prevention. Athletes are encouraged to be leaders in changing peer norms and school climate to a culture of safety and respect. The program is designed to be used in conjunction with other programs with intentional efforts to engage men and boys.

### **Origins of the Program:**

The program was originally drafted in 2015 by the Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress as part of a comprehensive sexual assault prevention project at Garfield High School in Seattle, WA. The first pilot group, which included athletes from both the wrestling and basketball teams, served as an advisory board where they helped shape the development of the program. Since then, the program has been evaluated with several teams at Garfield and several others nationally with promising results.

"Athletes As Leaders" was originally named "Student Leaders & Athletic Youth," or SLAY. The name was coined by the original pilot group and youth advisory board for the program. "Slay" is common slang term used by young people. Urban dictionary provides the definition: "to succeed in something amazing." We acknowledge that this term traditionally had a violent connotation, and we appreciate that youth, particularly young women, have reclaimed this term and use it in a very positive, empowering way.

As the program started to gain interest nationally, we received feedback that the name "SLAY" did not translate in several other communities. We decided to re-brand with a new name "Athletes As Leaders." Athletes as Leaders is a program that is culturally competent, rooted in anti-oppression, and based on the research in our field, and that is relevant to young people. The name gets to the heart of what the program is about, and gives the program opportunity to grow.

## **Rationale: The Connection between Athletes As Leaders and Sexual Assault Prevention**

Our program empowers young people to change social norms in their community. Young people are given many messages in society about gender inequality and unhealthy relationships. When girls support and encourage one another to become leaders in their communities, everyone benefits. They can have an active voice in creating new norms that support female empowerment, gender equity and healthy relationships.

**Athletes As Leaders is based on research and best practices in sexual assault prevention and seeks to make communities safer.** Research shows that when girls are empowered, sexual violence is actually less likely to occur.<sup>1</sup> Promoting girl positivity and teaching girls to challenge gender stereotypes also contributes to the creation of a safer environment and moves toward a violence-free world.

**Primary prevention refers to stopping violence before it starts.** Research shows that sexual assault primary prevention strategies should target men and boys, as they are more likely to perpetrate this type of violence.<sup>2</sup> More and more, sexual assault primary prevention programs aim to teach boys to respect people of all genders, to challenge unhealthy messages about masculinity, and to intervene when they see others treating someone abusively. These programs are a critical piece of the movement against sexual violence, and we recommend that Athletes As Leaders be used alongside other programming with intentional efforts to engage men and boys, such as Coaching Boys into Men.

**But we can't stop with boys...** because ending sexual violence will take all of us. The more inclusive the movement, the more comprehensive the efforts will be. People of all genders have a role to play in preventing sexual violence, including high school girls.

**...And we can't rely on traditional sexual assault prevention messages targeting girls and women.** These include messages such as:

"Don't walk alone at night."

"Be sure to watch your drink. Better yet, don't drink at all."

"Don't dress in a way that might send someone the wrong message."

"Take a self-defense class."

"Carry mace or a whistle."

These messages are usually well-intentioned and are not necessarily bad advice in a world where women rightfully fear victimization. But a person can follow all of them and still be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/riskprotectivefactors.html>

<sup>2</sup> Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *Lancet* (London, England), 385(9977), 1580-9.

sexually assaulted. These messages tend to focus the responsibility on the victims of assault rather than on the perpetrators.

The only way to truly prevent sexual assault before it happens-- primary prevention-- is to prevent the perpetrator from perpetrating and to change the social norms that allow sexual violence to happen. This is why efforts targeting all genders are indispensable.

Athletes As Leaders aims to target some of the subtle and normalized forms of sexual harassment and violence that girls perpetrate on other girls. This includes bullying, sexual harassment (including "slut-shaming"), rumor spreading, and female objectification, which are particularly common among youth. The program also addresses ways that girls contribute to a climate where sexual violence is more likely to happen, such as the general tolerance of sexual violence, adherence to traditional gender role norms, and social norms related to gender inequity.

These more subtle forms of violence and gender norms contribute to an environment that devalues girls and women, which is a risk factor for sexual violence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the CDC lists "strengthening leadership and opportunities for adolescent girls" as a key approach for preventing sexual violence.<sup>4</sup>

**Athletes As Leaders promotes female empowerment and offers opportunities for team bonding. But in reality, it's so much more.**

### **Why Athletes?**

Athletic programs are a fitting location for both sexual assault prevention and leadership development programming.

- 1) **High school athletes have strong social networks.** Research shows that athletes tend to have high levels of social capital. They are often popular and respected.<sup>5</sup> Athletes tend to have a lot of friends and be leaders at school. Over half of all high school students play at least one sport,<sup>6</sup> so if we think about all the students on an athletic team plus all of their diverse cross-sections of friends, reaching athletes has the potential to spread a positive message throughout a community.
- 2) **The team environment is conducive to social norms re-setting.** Athletes As Leaders helps teams create team norms (during the "Team Talk") that they can all agree to carry out in their communities. A sports team is a perfect environment for the athletes

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/riskprotectivefactors.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-prevention-technical-package.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Dobosz, R., & Beaty, L. (1999). The relationship between athletic participation and high school students' leadership ability. *Adolescence*, 34(133), 215-20.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=participation-in-school-athletics>

and coaches to be able to reinforce the agreed-upon norms. They can practice the new team norms on and off the field together. If whole athletic teams begin to live out healthy social norms, they will influence their friends and family not on the team to also live out healthy norms.

- 3) **For boys, sports can be a place that reinforces the harmful, stereotypical narrative of masculinity in our culture.** In sports, boys are socialized to be strong, tough and unemotional. "Locker room talk" often degrades women and LGBTQ people. Hyper-masculinity is often celebrated in sports culture, while challenging traditional male stereotypes is discouraged. For these reasons, sports are a critical space to begin deconstructing these gender stereotypes and setting a standard of respect.
  
- 4) **Female athletes are already challenging gender stereotypes every day, but there's still a long way to go.** Female athletes represent what it means to be strong, tough and determined women. Because of the federal Title IX law mandating gender equality within federally funded schools, more girls are getting a chance to play sports than ever before. But large pay inequities still exist between male and female professional athletes and media coverage of female sports is significantly less than that of men's and often focuses on the female athlete's appearance rather than her performance. So, sports provide a place where girls and women can feel empowered and a fitting platform to continue to push for equality.

### **Using Athletes As Leaders in Your Community:**

Our online toolkit offers many resources to help get you started, including:

- » The Complete Program
- » Evaluation Tools
- » Implementation Guide for Advocates
- » Trainings for Mentors & Coaches
- » Facilitation Guide for Mentors
- » Information for Coaches and Athletes

Learn more at <http://www.AthletesAsLeaders.org/>

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**Raliance**

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