



## CSHC Spotlight On: **Communities In Schools Health Center at Richmond High School**



Located in the heart of the inner city, Richmond High School is surrounded by a community that has been hard hit by the economic downturn and the escalation of gang violence in recent years. Add to that a high profile sexual assault case that generated much negative national media attention, and one gets the sense that this health center and these students have many tough challenges. But a visitor is impressed by the quiet calm pervading the health center and the confidence of Megan Gasser, Health Services Coordinator, who has been working at Richmond High for four years. “There are many misconceptions about our school and its students,” says Gasser. “I’d like people to know just how wonderful our students are. They are strong and resilient. They’ve overcome many challenges. I’ve also seen firsthand how supportive they are of one another.” Gasser is very proud of the health center and the role it has played in supporting students as they’ve faced some of life’s most difficult challenges. “We’ve seen it all in our health center,” explains Gasser. “But we’ve also seen many lives changed as a result of the services we offer. These kids can turn themselves around and move forward in positive ways when they get the support and encouragement they need.”

The Richmond High health center is open every school day from 8 am to 3:30 pm. Students can drop by in the mornings for medical services, or make an appointment to see a mental health

specialist. Medical services provided include physicals, hearing and vision screening, immunizations, blood and urine testing, reproductive health services, as well as referrals to health providers and community agencies. The center also has a strong contingent of mental health workers, including two full time clinicians who are in the center daily, three who work in the center one day a week, and three who are completing their residencies.

One might think there could be some type of stigma attached to receiving mental health services, but, according to Gasser, Richmond High students see it for what it is – a great way to get help and guidance from someone who is knowledgeable and has their best interests at heart. “Having someone to talk to and with whom they can work through their problems is of tremendous benefit to students,” says Gasser. “We’ve seen students overcome depression, work through grief and loss, and turnaround negative behaviors to get back on track for graduation. We’ve also seen students go from failing grades to thinking about college and careers.” That’s a great payoff for the health center staff who labor under less than ideal conditions in a small portable that’s shared with the Adult Education program for the school district.

After the assault on campus, more community based organizations came to offer their

services, and the school district increased funding for the health center. Through Contra Costa Public Health Clinical Services, a TeenAge Program facilitator provides coordination of community based organizations that come to campus to provide education and services. The Y Team – the mental health program of YMCA of the East Bay – provides the majority of mental health services. STAND! Against Domestic Violence does classroom presentations for students, and Community Health for Asian Americans offers various programs and services for adolescents.

The health center is also a key player in a new program focused on students becoming empowered to build a healthier school environment and community. It began with the whole school watching a hip hop themed film about respectful and healthy relationships among urban youth. After the film there were discussion groups, which were then followed up with classes on topics such as violence prevention, bystander roles and intervention, prejudices and stereotypes, as well as social justice and empowerment. The program was implemented mid-year and is still being evaluated for outcomes. Currently, there are plans to continue the program with 9<sup>th</sup> graders during the upcoming school year.

Student involvement in the health center has included a youth advisory board, which was established with help and guidance from one of CSHC's field coordinators. To keep the health center in sync with student needs, focus groups and needs assessments will be conducted later this year to obtain student feedback and to fine tune health center services, if necessary.

While the challenges in a community such as Richmond can seem overwhelming, the health center focuses on the tangible results they see everyday. Recently a student with severe dental and oral health issues came into the health center. Due to her dental problems, this student was withdrawn and rarely smiled. She was evaluated by the FNP on staff then promptly referred to a local dentist, where she received oral health care and the braces she so badly needed. Over time, this girl transformed from a shy introvert to an outgoing, talkative, confident young lady. "Seeing this girl smiling and happy was very satisfying," says Gasser. "It reminds us how important our work is here. Despite budget cuts and difficulties getting funding, it's good to see these kids begin to thrive after they come to our health center."

*By Aileen Olson*

Started: 1993

Sponsors: Contra Costa Health Services and West Contra Costa County Unified School District

Services: Medical, mental health, reproductive services

Staff: Health Services Coordinator, Part-time Community Health Worker, 8 Mental Health Clinicians, 3 Family Nurse Practitioners

Schedule: Monday to Friday, 8 am to 3:30 pm

Location: Portable unit on campus

Student Body: 1,500+ students

Total visits: (Sept to March): 797

Referrals: (Sept to March): 181

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