



Background Information

Athletes As Leaders Core Principles:

These are the core principles we believe all schools and organizations want for their community members. We encourage student athletes to model and promote these as social norms with their peers.

- Health & Safety
- Inclusive & Welcoming Community
- Empathy
- Consent
- Gender & Racial Equity
- Youth Leadership

Program Goals:

The program goals for Athletes As Leaders (AAL) are listed briefly here, with further explanation and recommended reading in the last section of this document.

Long Term Goals:

- Change the social norms of the school and/or athletic community by leveraging the social influence of student athletes to support the AAL core principles
- Reduce and prevent instances of sexual/gender-based harm, abuse, assault, bullying, harassment, and victim blaming
- Create an environment focused on equity

Short Term Goals:

- Increase gender equitable attitudes (by challenging harmful gender stereotypes; and reducing adherence to rigid gender norms)
- Increase a sense of leadership individually and as a team to improve the community to reflect AAL core principles
- Increase connection to and cohesion within community [the mentor(s), the team, the school]

- Create a sense of inclusion, support, and belonging for people of all gender identities, racial identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and other marginalized identities
- Increase empathy and concern for how one's actions affect others
- Increase willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good; increase intention to intervene in situations of harm
- Create and promote positive norms within the team; decrease acceptance and normalization of harmful behaviors
- Understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors; Increase caring behaviors and decrease harmful behaviors

About the Program:

Athletes As Leaders (AAL) is a gender-inclusive program designed for high school athletes on girls' sports teams. The program aims to empower student athletes to take an active role in promoting healthy relationships and ending sexual violence. Athletes As Leaders 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 programs with intentional efforts to engage men and boys, and athletes on boys' sports teams.

Origins of the Program:

The program was originally created in 2015 by the Harborview Abuse & Trauma Center as a part of a comprehensive sexual assault prevention program 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" has historically been an empowering term used by young people, particularly by women, people of color, and queer communities. However, 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, based on the research in the sexual assault prevention field, and is relevant to young people. The name gets to the heart of what the program is about, and gave the program the opportunity to grow.

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

Athletes As Leaders empowers young people to change social norms in their community. Young people are given many messages in society about unhealthy relationships, stereotypes and negative messages about certain groups of people. In this program, athletes can have an active voice in creating new norms that promote equality, healthy relationships, and consent. Athletes are encouraged to use their social influence to help create a community that is safe and welcoming for everyone, thus moving toward a violence-free world.

Primary prevention refers to stopping violence before it starts. Research shows that sexual assault primary prevention strategies should mobilize men and boys, as they are more likely to perpetrate this type of violence. 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 and creating safer communities.

...And we can't rely on traditional sexual assault prevention messages that traditionally target female-identified people. 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 tend to focus the responsibility on the victims of assault rather than on those who cause harm. The only way to truly prevent sexual assault before it happens-- primary prevention-- is to prevent people from perpetrating violence and to change the social norms that allow sexual violence to happen. This is why efforts that engage and mobilize all genders are indispensable.

Athletes As Leaders addresses of the subtle and normalized forms of sexual harassment and violence. This includes bullying, sexual harassment (including "slut-shaming" and body shaming), rumor spreading (including sexual rumor spreading), and victim blaming, which are particularly common among young people. AAL also addresses harmful gender roles which contribute to social norms about men's superiority and women's inferiority, which are risk factors for sexual violence as noted in the [CDC Risk and Protective Factors for SV Perpetration](#). The program addresses ways that women/girls, nonbinary & gender non-conforming folks can contribute to a climate where sexual violence is less likely to happen.

Athletes As Leaders promotes violence prevention 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 be known and respected members of their communities. 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, 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 re-setting social norms. Athletes As Leaders assists in creating team norms (during the "Team Talk") that athletes can all agree to carry out in their communities. A sports team is a perfect environment for the athletes and coaches to be able to reinforce the group 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) Sports can sometimes be a place that reinforces the harmful, stereotypical narrative of masculinity in our culture. In sports, male-identified athletes are often socialized to be strong, tough and unemotional. "Locker room talk" often degrades women and LGBTQ+ people. Hypermasculinity 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) Sports are still a very binary system. Regardless of how someone may identify, athletes are categorized by "male" or "female" based on social conditioning or perception. Athletes As Leaders aims to be gender inclusive by acknowledging that not everyone on girls' sports teams identifies as a girl. Although AAL aims to engage with those who do not identify as cisgender boys, the program may be a good fit for various groups and teams. Those who play on girls' sports teams are often challenging gender stereotypes every day, but there's still a long way to go. Large pay inequities still exist between professional athletes on men's and women's teams and media coverage of those in women's sports is significantly less than those in men's sports. But, sports can provide a place where all athletes can be empowered to advocate for equality.

For Further Reading:

In this section, we revisit the program goals with suggested links for further reading. Athletes As Leaders is based on research and best practices in sexual assault prevention and seeks to make communities safer. The program creators considered the risk and protective factors for sexual assault (and other forms of interpersonal violence according to the [CDC's Connecting the Dots](#)) and designed content to address specific goals.

Long Term Goals:

- Change the social norms of the school and/or athletic community by leveraging the social influence of student athletes to support the AAL core principles. Learn more about social norms approach here: [National Social Norms Center](#)
- Reduce and prevent instances of sexual/gender-based harm, abuse, assault, bullying, harassment, victim blaming. See “Key Messages” for each AAL session to learn more.
- Create an environment focused on equity.

Short Term Goals:

- Increase gender equitable attitudes (by challenging harmful gender stereotypes; and reducing adherence to rigid gender norms): The [CDC's published research on the risk and protective factors for perpetration of sexual assault](#) identifies norms and attitudes related to gender inequity as risk factors. Harmful norms around masculinity and femininity are societal risk factors for 6 different types of interpersonal violence identified in [CDC's Connecting the Dots](#) including bullying, sexual violence, and teen dating violence.
- Increase a sense of leadership individually and as a team to improve the community to reflect AAL core principles: The [CDC's STOP SV Technical Package](#) identifies that strengthening leadership and opportunities for girls is one of the recommended approaches to prevent sexual violence.
- Increase connection to and cohesion within community [the mentor(s), the team, the school]. The [CDC's Connecting the Dots](#) resource identifies connection to school and community connectedness as protective factors.
- Create a sense of inclusion, support, and belonging for people of all gender identities, racial identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and other marginalized identities. Research shows higher rates of sexual assault against women/girls, LGBTQ+ folks, specific communities of color, and people with disabilities. AAL encourages athletes to help create a space that is welcoming and safe for everyone, and to consider how they can challenge oppression, bias and stereotypes that contribute to the acceptance and prevalence of violence against marginalized groups.
- Increase empathy and concern for how one's actions affect others. Lack of concern for others is an individual risk factor and empathy is listed as a protective factor in the [CDC's research on risk and protective factors](#).

- Increase willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good; increase intention to intervene in situations of harm. Learn more at [Collective Efficacy: the cohesion between members of a community and their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good](#). The [CDC's STOP SV Technical Package](#) identifies bystander approaches as a strategy to promote social norms that protect against violence.
- Create and promote positive norms within the team; decrease acceptance and normalization of harmful behaviors. Cultural norms that support aggression toward others is a risk factor identified in [CDC's Connecting the Dots](#).
- Understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors; Increase caring behaviors and decrease harmful behaviors. Athletes As Leaders includes strategies throughout the program to decrease harmful behaviors (such as reducing bias, "unlearning" stereotypes about specific groups of people, ensuring consent in interpersonal interactions, and so on.) See program sessions for specific behaviors addressed.