

NATURAL HELPERS OF MAINE PROGRAM
Presented by Norman D. Boucher, M.Ed. & Students

HISTORY OF NATURAL HELPERS OF MAINE PROGRAM

The *Natural Helpers of Maine Program* is a program of Day One of Portland, Cape Elizabeth and Hollis. For the past 12 years Day One has offered this program to schools across Maine. The program itself is about 20 years old. Two schoolteachers who noticed something going on in their school started it in Seattle, Washington. They noticed that there were certain people in the high school that other people were comfortable talking to about their problems. Here was a group of people who had naturally risen to the level of comfort around their peers. They were respected enough that people naturally wanted to go to them and talk to them. The teachers questioned how they might make effective use of this phenomenon to help the school and the school community. They developed the Natural Helpers program. About 3 or 4 years ago they sold the rights and Natural Helpers is now a national program.

MISSION

Natural Helpers of Maine, coordinated by Day One, is rooted in the knowledge that there exists within every school a natural network of teens helping teens that, when recognized and utilized, can play a primary role in the development of a school's overall prevention and helping system. *Natural Helpers of Maine* is committed to the identification, training and support of groups of *Natural Helpers* to the following end: that every student, regardless of status, feels that they have an appropriately trained peer from whom they can comfortably seek support and/or assistance with personal problems so that the link between adult professionals and the existing helping network is established and utilized for the referral of students with more severe problems, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, eating disorders and suicide. The *Natural Helpers*, individually and as a group, can initiate and assist pro-active prevention activities within the school and community.

PARTICIPATION IN MAINE

This year, 2000, in Maine there are 17 participating high schools, ranging from Fort Kent Community High School in Aroostook County to many schools in southern Maine. It is an

expense for each school that participates in the program, however, the rewards outweigh the expense. Today five schools, Gorham High School, Scarborough High School, Greely High School, Falmouth High School and Deering High School, were at the workshop to share their perspectives and to provide information about the program.

TRAINING

Training on how to be a *Natural Helper* is offered in the fall. Schools are grouped together in groups of 2 to 4 and schools that are in close proximity usually are separated. The training is 2- day residential training that prepares the *Natural Helper* to interact with peers who may be experiencing problems and teaches them a variety of skills. They are taught about red flag issues of physical abuse, sexual abuse, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicide that need referral, as well as how to be better listeners. One of the activities that they do at the training is to sit for 5 to 10 minutes and listen to another person who is continually speaking while portraying an openness and willingness to listen. An unsaid part of the training is the bonding that happens among the participants and the learning about what issues are facing kids from school to school. The students get to hear about what other programs have done in their schools in past years and what has and has not been successful. The *Natural Helpers* return from this training and spread the word in their own school community. They may do a variety of things to make themselves and the *Natural Helpers'* mission known in the school. An example from one school is that each week the group sponsors events on different topics, such as drunk driving, in order to make the community and their school aware of these issues. Student coordinators from each school then meet together monthly throughout the school year. Additional training programs are offered through this group and the student coordinators also organize training programs for different schools. At the end of the year, there is a daylong conference for anyone. Last year there were 28 workshops covering topics from breathing to yoga to eating disorders and 200 to 250 youth and adults attended.

NATURAL HELPER STUDENT AND COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The *Natural Helper* Student Advisory Committee and *Natural Helper* Community Advisory Committee gather input from the student body and from the community. How the program is going is reviewed and reflects on a variety of subjects including: How do you keep

the program going? How do you promote the program and keep its integrity at the same time? How are boundaries maintained? These are ongoing questions the *Natural Helpers* ask themselves and of which they must remain cognizant.

SELECTION

Natural Helpers are selected by their school community to participate. The school community is encouraged to choose students from every aspect of the peer community in order to match the diversity of the students at their school. The variety of people is important so that everybody can have someone with whom they can feel comfortable talking. Most schools circulate a survey asking students to identify 2 or 3 students with whom they feel comfortable talking and any particular issues that are pressing. Adult guides also are chosen based upon their approachability rather than any particular position they may hold at the school.

WHAT IT IS ALL ABOUT

The *Natural Helpers* program itself is, in essence, a peer advising program. Students can come at anytime to talk. Ninety-nine percent of what *Natural Helpers* do is just listening; they are cautioned not to see themselves as “fixing” things. A critical piece of the *Natural Helpers* Program is learning how to refer students who are having problems beyond the *Natural Helper’s* capability to help. *Natural Helpers* are trained on how to handle and refer serious situations that are common among teens, such as suicidal situations, situations that need to be taken to someone such as a teacher or a clinician. Sometimes the *Natural Helper* will try to go to that first meeting with that adult or other person in order to make it more comfortable for the student. The *Natural Helpers* are encouraged to get together as a school group and put together a proactive prevention plan on some issue for their school for the year, e.g., substance abuse or eating disorders. Some schools do a weekly awareness event, participate in orientations or contribute to parent awareness nights.

REACHING OUT

Getting the *Natural Helpers* known is an important activity and one of the most difficult. The weekly awareness event helps and there is a bulletin board with pictures of all of the *Natural Helpers* posted. Students also know who the *Natural Helpers* are because they elected them.

New students are helped by the *Natural Helpers*, who show them around the first day. There is also a freshman orientation at one of the schools. The word also spreads, “You help your friend and they help their friends,” and an extremely large network develops. *Natural Helpers* can be quite vocal, so people are naturally drawn to them.

LEARNING BOUNDARIES

Because the *Natural Helpers* are easily turned to for assistance and help, they are taught about boundaries. They are taught to refer certain issues, such as physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, eating disorders, self mutilation or suicide, which are not that uncommon in high schools these days. A system is set up with guidance people and adult facilitators whom the *Natural Helpers* know and to whom they can refer kids with these issues.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is maintained except when there are red flag issues. Support and debriefing is needed for the *Natural Helpers* and there is sharing with each other at the meetings without names and detailed information about things that have happened, things that they hear are building up and things that are affecting how they are doing. Confidentiality is an area that is covered in depth at the initial training.

About the Presenter

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