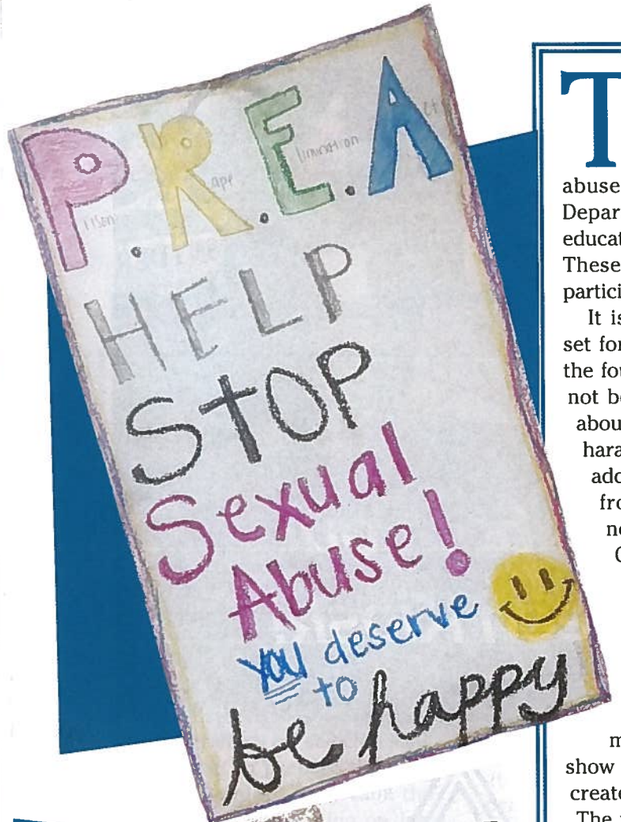
Promoting Zero Tolerance of Sexual Abuse in Juvenile Facilities

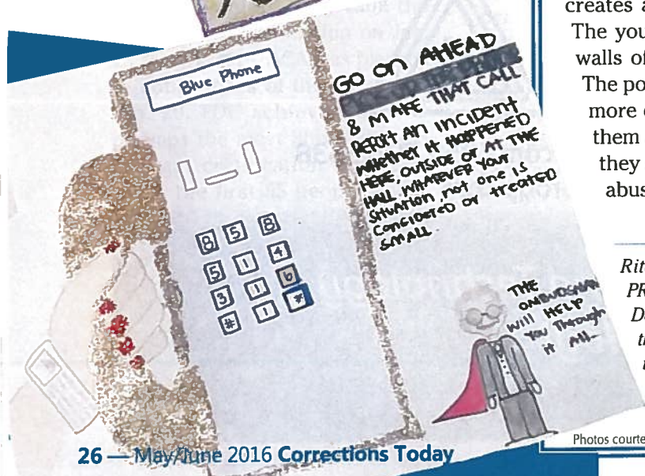
By Rita Garrity, Yvette Klepin and Robert Sayasane



To promote a culture of zero tolerance for sexual misconduct in a juvenile facility, it is important to explain to the youths how to report abuse and the rights of the individuals to be free from sexual abuse and harassment. The San Diego County Probation Department (SDCPD) has created various age-appropriate educational programs in its juvenile facilities to promote this. These programs are engaging and require staff and youth participation to change the culture within the facilities.

It is important, when implementing juvenile standards set forth by the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), to lay the foundational idea that sexual abuse and harassment will not be tolerated and must be reported. To help this come about, each unit reads during breakfast a "preventing sexual harassment" script that was developed by SDCPD staff. In addition, staff engage youths in weekly programs, ranging from Jeopardy games and word searches to graphic novels provided by American University's Washington College of Law.

One program in particular, formatted and age-appropriate for all youths, is the PREA poster program. In the PREA poster program, staff define and discuss their facility's zero-tolerance policy with the youths; then, using art supplies, the youths create posters to show their understanding of what zero tolerance means to them. This program allows youths of all ages to show their artistic and creative sides, while at the same time creates a therapeutic and learning environment all around. The youths take pride in their posters, seeing them on the walls of their units or dorms and throughout the facilities. The posters are of various sizes and colors, some simpler or more detailed than others — but the one thing that makes them all similar is the message: The SDCPD and the youths they serve have zero tolerance for sexual misconduct and abuse in their facilities.



Rita Garrity is a correctional deputy probation officer and PREA compliance manager at the San Diego County Probation Department. Yvette Klepin is assistant chief probation officer at the San Diego County Probation Department. Robert Sayasane is supervising probation officer and ombudsman at the San Diego Probation Department.

Photos courtesy San Diego County Probation Department