

# Peer to peer: Students aim to help through teen counseling

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Print Opinions Editor

"Peers for Peers: No Spartan Stands Alone" is the motto of MVHS's new Peer Counseling Program, which was introduced in spring of 2024. In hopes of addressing the high prevalence of mental health challenges among teens, the program aims to reduce stigma and provide counseling by trained students offering "empathy and resources" to other students in need.

"It's important to normalize mental health," MVHS therapist Janine

Sullivan said. "When you're struggling, having a peer or friend to talk to about those things can normalize those feelings and, if needed, connect them with resources and specialists."

Peer counseling offers the opportunity for students to engage with other students, instead of being limited to an adult to adolescent environment.

Peer counselors — sophomores and above — undergo training to equip them with essential skills for their roles. The training includes sessions led by mental health professionals,

focusing on social and emotional skills as well as fostering empathetic behavior, that is needed for this service. Additionally, students receive specialized training from Teen Mental Health First Aid, a course designed to instill skills needed to support adolescents facing mental health challenges.

Members of administration, including Assistant Principal Marti McGuirk, Principal Dr. Glaser, and many others have played a significant role in the development of this program, program adviser

Michelle Campusano said. "We do have a really solid relationship with our admin team, with our clinician team, with our mental health counselors, and teachers on campus," Campusano said. "The feedback from everyone is super supportive, which is exactly what we want."

Campusano herself was a peer counselor when she was in high school, and said she recognizes the positive impact of students going to their peers first for support.

One in five teens face a mental health challenge, according to the Center for Disease Control. Junior Rani Sindlededeker, who proposed this program and is overseeing its development said she hopes to end the stigma around mental health challenges and open more students to gaining access to care.

"I believe our generation is the generation to become stigma-free, because we are the pioneers for this movement," Sindlededeker said. "It really is up to bringing in student leadership and programs like this to bring that out."

The program is in process of creating a system where students can either walk in or get referrals to meet with a trained student counselor,

allowing them to be sent to more professional care.

"The main objective for this year is showing that we're here, being present," Campusano said. "Making sure that we have a strong foundation [is] going to set everyone up for success," Campusano said.

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Time has been a critical factor in the development of the Peer Counseling Program. Establishing a program of this nature involves numerous steps before integrating the initiative into the MVHS campus, Sindlededeker said. The program is currently in its early stages, focusing on building a foundation and preparing for more comprehensive implementation in the future.

"We are a very new program, but I think the path that everyone has

within peer counselors, with all the students that have joined, we really are just a group of really passionate students who are looking forward to supporting our peers," Sindlededeker said.

The program hosted a "Hello Week," which introduced the program to the school community. The week consisted of many activities, such as making a paper chain to symbolically link the community together, writing gratitude notes, writing and receiving letters to and from fellow Spartans, and giving out fidgets. The program is also hoping to launch other initiatives such as "A Table for Everyone," which is a safe space designed for those who may not have a regular lunch group, ensuring that no student has to eat alone.

The motivation of these peer counselors is evident in their eagerness to engage with their peers and contribute to the program's success, Sullivan said.

"I feel really lucky and excited to work with these incredibly empathetic and wise youth," Sullivan said. "Their pure hearts and dedication to helping their peers is truly inspiring. They have the wisdom and drive that will make a significant impact."



Peer Counselors undergo teen mental health first aid training in Student Services building in first meeting.