

# Capitol Hill: Cantor speaks about teen dating violence

WASHINGTON, DC — The middle school years are times of great promise, and great trepidation. During those years, youth begin to date and form special relationships, and it is not uncommon as they explore this uncharted territory for middle schoolers to be on top of the world one moment, and in the depths of despair the next.

It is a time when it is so important to be cool and liked by others, and a time when bullying and abusive relationships can develop if the youngsters aren't equipped with the tools and values that



(L-R) Lori Weinstein, executive director of Jewish Women International, Esta Soler, president of the Family Violence Prevention Fund, and Temple Ahavat Shalom Cantor Deborah Jacobson at the recent Capitol Hill briefing on teen dating violence.

can help them avoid these problems.

Those were issues addressed when Cantor Deborah Jacobson of Temple Ahavat Shalom in Palm Harbor went to Washington recently to speak at a briefing on Capitol Hill, on the role the faith

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community has in teen dating violence prevention and intervention.

In her roles as a mother and cantor, Jacobson is keenly aware of the pressures middle schoolers face. She is also a member of the Jewish Women International's National Leadership Council and co-chair of the JWI Youth Committee. The invitation to speak was through JWI.

The briefing, titled "Middle School Matters," included governmental leaders, senior policy makers and domestic violence experts who discussed the most effective ways to stop teen dating violence. Jacobson was the sole clergy member to speak. Other speakers included members of Congress John Lewis (D-GA) and Gwen Moore (D-WI); Judge Susan Carbon; Esta Soler, president of the Family Violence Prevention Fund, and Kevin Jennings, assistant deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools.

"The faith community and faith-based prevention programs are an essential part of the solution to our teen dating violence epidemic," Jacobson told those at the briefing. "It is going to take partnership, innovation and a holistic approach that covers every point of entry for kids to learn about healthy relationships. Our teens may be growing up and dating in the modern age, but the oldest institutions have a lot to contribute to new solutions."

Jacobson stressed the role adults can play in helping teens make good choices. "In the faith-based community, youth group leaders, choir directors, camp counselors and athletic coaches are important influencers for millions of teens ... These informal educators serve as role models and also develop close personal relationships based on trust with the teens. ... [They] are an invaluable resource to deliver prevention messages that resonate with their teens as well as healthy relationship and dating violence prevention education within a faith context."

Jacobson noted that in 2007, JWI recognized "that the collective experiences of religious leaders would enhance the national dialogue about federal domestic violence policy," so it convened the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition, comprised of nearly 30 member organizations that represent millions of congregants spanning the Jewish, Muslim, Bahá'í, United Methodist, Catholic, Evangelical, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Mennonite, Seventh-Day Adventist and Unitarian Universalist communities.

"This is a distinct group – yet we all share the same core values, and concern for the safety and well-being of women and girls," she said.

For three years Jacobson has been working to institute the JWI program, "Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships" in the school system and this month she will begin the program for pre-confirmation eighth-grade girls at Temple Avahat Shalom.

The "Strong Girls" curriculum developed by JWI "is a multi-media program that uses video, writing, discussions, and creative activities to learn about healthy relationships and has a complementary program for Jewish boys, 'Good Guys, Partnership & Positive Masculinity,' which teaches 12 to 15-year-olds to think critically about power, control, and self-esteem and navigate social pressures in a younger context," she said in her speech on Capitol Hill.

"During this six-week [Strong Girls] curriculum we speak openly about the importance of friendship, especially as a basis for intimate relationships, and tools to deal with demeaning media messages, personal concerns like cliques and bullying and abusive and unhealthy relationships," Jacobson said.