

WHAT KIDS CAN DO - YOUTH RESEARCH FOR ACTION REPORT
DOROT AND NYC ISCHOOL
iADVOCATE: MAKING THE CITY LIVABLE FOR AGING NEW YORKERS
AUGUST 2015

With gratitude for receiving a What Kids Can Do “Youth Research in Action” grant, we are delighted to share the results of DOROT’s innovative intergenerational program conducted in partnership with the NYC iSchool’s government studies program. This initiative enabled us to bring high school students and older adults together through research and advocacy to address the challenges of getting older in our community.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

During the spring 2015 quarter, 19 NYC iSchool students participated in the government studies class “iAdvocate: Making the City Livable for Aging New Yorkers” and partnered with four DOROT seniors to determine solutions for critical challenges faced by older adults. Three students from the class also participated in DOROT’s internship program for two hours each week after school, where they learned about the concerns older New Yorkers face, including social isolation, and how our intergenerational programs enrich the lives of seniors and volunteers. The interns’ work at DOROT informed the iAdvocate projects they conducted with their classmates and senior partners.

The class was divided into groups of four or five students; each group worked with a DOROT senior to research and develop solutions for concerns including: Elder Abuse, Elder Scamming (Financial Abuse), Senior Education (Technology Gaps), and Transportation (Inaccessibility). Students conducted research, wrote to local public officials, created story boards about their selected subjects, and filmed a corresponding public service announcement (PSA). The students presented their PSAs at the end of the semester to an audience comprised of DOROT staff members, NYC iSchool faculty and parents, and a representative from Councilmember Helen Rosenthal’s Office in Manhattan’s 6th District.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Prior to beginning the class, the NYC iSchool students who were interning at DOROT met with our Volunteer Services staff to learn about the agency and how volunteers can make a meaningful difference in the lives of older adults. The entire class of 19 then explored the following questions:

- What is public policy?
- What does it mean to be a good citizen?
- How does it feel to live as an older person in New York City?
- How can teens work with seniors to improve our community?
- How do we help public officials understand problems faced by seniors and make improvements that work for all of us?

The class instructor, Katy Barber, asked each group to write a letter to a New York legislator regarding their concerns, which they edited throughout the course. The students conducted research on their subjects and used their findings to create a survey and poll their peers. They interviewed their senior partners at DOROT, wrote journal entries, read articles, and compiled statistics. The groups then finalized their letters to public officials, designed storyboards featuring key facts and graphics (e.g., survey outcomes, logos), and developed scripts for their PSAs. The participants also engaged two additional DOROT older adult volunteers and one student's father to create compelling short videos depicting struggles seniors face when growing old in New York City (*please see attached*).

KEY OUTCOMES

On June 15, 2015, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, 19 high school students and three of their four senior partners (one senior could not attend due to health concerns) presented their strategies from "iAdvocate" at DOROT. The students and seniors showcased their story boards, readily sharing facts they had discovered while preparing the projects. The groups then presented their PSAs, which integrated aspects of their research including survey outcomes, useful resources, and actions that could be taken to address the problems as follows:

Elder abuse: Students reported that elder abuse is likely to involve caregivers and is largely unreported, leading to a lack of awareness. They also shared that elder abuse is mostly perpetrated against women (67 percent of cases). The group's survey respondents thought using social media should be the primary way to help solve elder abuse. The group wrote to Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a member of the Special Committee on Aging. DOROT's Case Assistance Social Worker, Katie Kluger, shared information about the elder abuse awareness training DOROT has provided, stating that, "*The more connections seniors have, the more likely it is that they will report abuse.*" Ms. E., the senior who partnered with this group, shared "*I am happy with the work DOROT does and pleased that the agency is in the position to see what is going on with seniors.*"

Elder Scamming: Students shared that older adults are typically called at home and asked to respond to a financial emergency on behalf of a loved one. They also described elder fraud as an international concern, reporting that particular attention is paid to building awareness about senior scams in the United Kingdom during the month of July. The group also wrote to Senator Gillibrand, who introduced the Senior Investor Protections Enhancement Act of 2013, legislation that would enact a \$50,000 civil penalty for fraud violations against seniors.

Senior Education: Students presented reasons why older adults should become more informed about using technology, including gaining access to information and becoming more connected to the community, which they enjoy through NYC iSchool online courses. The group wrote to NYC Councilmember and Chair of the NYC Aging Committee, Margaret Chin, who is promoting seniors' use of technology to prevent fraud and make online education accessible. One student expressed, "*Senior citizens are at a disadvantage in our world. Without the skills to use modern technology, they lag behind the rest of society in their ability to stay connected by these devices, and their skills in other areas like foreign languages.*"

Transportation: The students worked with Mrs. M., who shared her experience as a senior trying to navigate the New York City subway system. Specific challenges she cited include difficulty boarding public buses due to the fact that so many people crowd the front of the bus, the number of subway steps combined with the fact that escalators and elevators are often out of order, and dealing with “rude New Yorker attitudes.” Students composed a letter to Manhattan Borough President, Gale Brewer, in which they described these challenges and suggested solutions including combining the routes of alternate transportation services that operate in different areas of the city.

LESSONS LEARNED

The students engaged in a Q & A session with the attendees, with each group responding to questions about the topic they covered. DOROT’s Executive Director Mark Meridy asked, “What surprised you the most?” eliciting the following responses:

Elder Abuse:

- Seniors seldom report elder abuse, including ongoing emotional abuse, because they feel ashamed.
- Doormen can play a large role in detecting elder abuse and can take related classes.

Elder Scamming:

- 57 percent of scamming involves adults over 50 years old.
- Scamming often takes place by text and over the internet, including scams that involve seizing all of an individual’s financial information.
- Not enough time is spent on building awareness about elder scamming.

Senior Education:

- 65 percent of seniors ages 75+ are not using the internet, despite the fact that 80 percent of all U.S. citizens access the internet.

Transportation:

- 77 percent of NYC subway stations are not ADA compliant.
- More than half a million New Yorkers ages 65 and older have limited access to public transportation.

Jason Harding, Director of Constituent Services within NYC Councilmember Helen Rosenthal’s office, shared initiatives that have been implemented on behalf of older adults. They include: having a Senior Specialist available in the district office on Mondays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.; providing advocacy to alleviate rental increases through the NYC Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption program; and the “Safe Streets Initiatives,” through which a crossing light on Manhattan’s West End Avenue was extended by seven seconds to provide more time for seniors to cross the street. Learning about these initiatives and plans that are underway on behalf of older adults helped the students feel empowered about what they can accomplish through public advocacy.