BLUE DEVIL'S
Advocate
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Chris Vitelli

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Foreword

Dear Merced College Colleagues,

April is recognized annually as Sexual Assault Awareness Month, and so our focus this month turns to a matter deeply interwoven with our core values: the safety and well-being of our students, faculty, and staff.

This year, we're proud to spotlight the strides made by our Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) program—a testament to our commitment to fostering a safe, supportive, and respectful campus environment.

The RSVP program embodies our relentless pursuit of not just academic excellence, but also holistic care for every member of our community. This program stands as a beacon of hope and support, offering and facilitating a wide range of resources including awareness events, survivor advocacy and support, guest speakers, specialized training for our campus police, and bystander education for faculty and classified professionals—all designed to empower and protect.

In addition to telling you all about the RSVP program, we are excited to feature Carissa Hansford, who manages the program. Carissa has been working tirelessly to develop the programming, resources and relationships needed to make RSVP a success. Also in this issue, you'll meet Daisy Castillo, a Merced College alumna who now supports our Blue Devil community as our campus advocate, through her role with the Valley Crisis Center.

Our efforts in launching and nurturing the RSVP program align with our core values of student engagement, support, inclusivity, and well-being. These values are not abstract ideals but guiding principles that inform our actions and our dedication to creating a campus that is safe, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all its members.

As we move forward, let us all commit to supporting the RSVP program and its vital mission. Participate in events and trainings when they are made available, and get to know the resources that are available to those in our community who are in need of help.

Together, we can continue to build a campus culture that not only values academic success but also champions the safety and dignity of every individual. Thank you for your ongoing support and commitment.

Sincerely,

Chris Vitelli, Ed.D.
Superintendent/President

"Together, we can continue to build a campus culture that not only values academic success but also champions the safety and dignity of every individual."

To Prevent Sexual Violence, RSVP Program Begins With Awareness

By Luciana Chavez
Special to Merced College

Throughout April, which is Sexual Assault Awareness Month in the U.S., we're reminded that survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and the like, come from all genders, socioeconomic strata, races and ages.

The Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) Program at Merced College was launched in 2021 to educate and empower the campus community on this serious public health issue.

"RSVP is bringing people together and sharing the human experience," RSVP Manager Carissa Hansford said. "We're sharing positive messages about what healthy relationships are and how to develop them. RSVP is a force for prevention."

According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), 13% of all college students experience rape or sexual assault.

Mary Sue Savage, a national expert on campus sexual violence prevention, said increasing awareness is critical.

"Many of us do not grow up learning about consent, boundaries, or how to build healthy relationships," said Savage, the Executive Director of the Recognize Violence Change Culture organization in Oakland. "By the time people come to college, there's a lot of awareness and skill-building that needs to happen. A comprehensive approach is necessary. Prevention needs to be embedded within the campus culture."

How we got here

Title IX, a comprehensive federal civil rights law enacted in 1972, gave this issue a firm base when it prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, including all forms of sexual violence, for all institutions receiving federal funding. The Clery Act of 1990 added the Campus Sexual Assault Victim's Bill of Rights, requiring colleges to track and disclose specific campus crime statistics and safety policies.

The State of California committed more strongly to sexual violence prevention on college campuses by passing AB 2683 in September 2022. It requires all incoming college students to complete domestic violence and sexual assault prevention training.

In October 2021, Merced College was already one of 52 campuses nationwide to receive a $300,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Violence Against Women (OVW) Grant to reduce domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. It funds the prevention program, strengthens victim services, and provides trauma-informed training for staff.

The OVW grant requires colleges to do three things.

Merced College first had to gather its internal support groups to partner with organizations outside of campus.

The college now has a Coordinated Community Response Team (CCRT), which oversees the RSVP Program. It includes representatives from campus administration, student equity, student services, campus police, and Merced City Police.

Merced College already had a relationship with Valley Crisis Center in Merced, a local organization serving anyone in the county impacted by sexual violence and similar crimes.

The CCRT hired Valley Crisis Center veteran Daisy Castillo to act as the RSVP campus advocate. Castillo is the point person, offering confidential help and advocacy, for students, staff or faculty who have experienced sexual violence. The college also offers confidential counseling to all students from Merced College Student Health Services in both Merced and Los Banos.

The second provision required the college to create a mandatory prevention education program (RSVP) for all incoming students.

The grant also requires the school to offer active bystander intervention training. Among the first groups to train with RSVP last fall was the Office of Admissions & Records.

"In Admissions and Records, we follow students throughout their whole journey on campus," Director Jeanette Martin said. "There's no private space in our office, but I want us to have all of the survivor-centered tools we can get in case a student comes to us in distress."

Bystander training empowers everyone to identify warning signs of sexual violence.

"You don't always have to confront someone or insert yourself," Martin said. "We just don't want anyone to suffer in silence. The training helps you understand the many ways you can help."

RSVP also brought Savage's program onto campus last month, offering workshops and activities on understanding consent, building healthy relationships, and how to take a "survivor-centered" approach when working with victims.

Savage said she was impressed with how warmly the Merced College community embraced the events, and the empathy and depth everyone showed during discussions throughout.

The third requirement of the grant is for campus law enforcement to train on delivering trauma-informed services that are anchored in safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment.

Among the principles taught to police are to believe survivors when they say they're being violated or abused, and even while investigating those crimes, to respect their choice about pressing charges.

The RSVP Program office is located on the second floor of the Downey Learning Resource Center (LRC).

Upcoming events

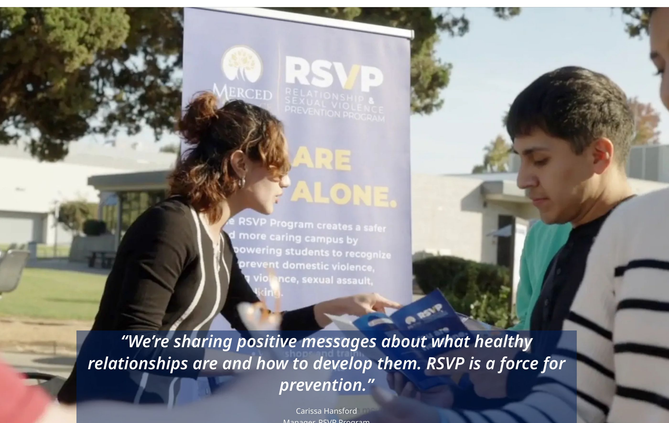
RSVP will recognize Sexual Assault Awareness Month as part of Campus Pride Week, beginning April 15 with a safety planning and self-care gathering at The Hub from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The college will celebrate Denim Day, a national day when allies wear denim in support of survivors, on April 24. RSVP staffers and the campus advocate will share how people can participate in Denim Day on April 17 at The Hub, and on April 23 at the Los Banos Campus. On Denim Day, RSVP and Valley Crisis Center partners will be at Coffee Bandits on Main Street in Merced from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. to talk to people about being advocates.

Also, keep an eye on the program's Instagram account (@mc_rsvp_program) for inspiration and information.

"The grant wants us to be proactive, to stop bad things before they happen," Hansford said. "Our students are starting to recognize what RSVP does. It's happening, and that's really cool."

Anyone on campus who has experienced sexual assault, abuse or trauma in their lives should consider contacting the Merced College RSVP Program for help at 209-756-6446 or campus.advocate@mccd.edu.



"We're sharing positive messages about what healthy relationships are and how to develop them. RSVP is a force for prevention."

Carissa Hansford
Manager, RSVP Program

Support for Sexual Violence Survivors Requires Empathy, Understanding

By Luciana Chavez
Special to Merced College

Sexual violence. Intimate partner violence. Sexual harassment. Human trafficking. Rape.

These are the ugly words that describe some of the most vile acts that human beings can inflict on other human beings.

The new Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) Program at Merced College hopes to be the strongest antidote to that awful reality for survivors of sexual violence.

Their philosophy boils down to a powerful statement of support: "You are not alone."

Estelina Munoz, in her 17th year at Merced College, serves as Director of Disabled Students Program & Services, the Veterans Resource Center and Student Health Services. All are key partners in the Coordinated Community Response Team (CCRT) that oversees the RSVP Program.

"We know that even though we have very low numbers of reported assaults on campus, it doesn't mean it's not happening," Munoz said. "People aren't comfortable talking about it, so they may not know who their allies are or where to report these crimes. Really the core purpose of this federal grant and the program is to create a cultural change on campus."

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center:

- One in 5 women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted in college.
- Two-thirds of all college students will be sexually harassed.
- Nine of 10 college women who are victims of rape know their offender.
- More than 90% of all sexual assaults go unreported.

Munoz said disabled students, foster youth and veterans are among the subpopulations on college campuses that are especially vulnerable to abuse.

"We support those students by making sure they know services and other workshops are tailored to their experiences," she said.

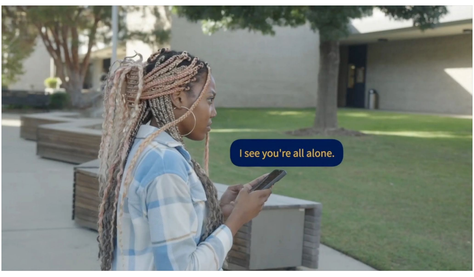
Lupe Garcia, Program Director of Merced's Valley Crisis Center, another CCRT partner, said the center has delivered required trainings to students, faculty and classified professionals. The center is also a key resource for partners, with expertise on securing housing for people fleeing dangerous situations.

With survivors, the center staff brings to the table extensive experience with the process of securing restraining orders, along with a firm commitment to support victims during forensic exams if they don't want to go alone.

The center, which helps about 900 survivors annually, operates in English, Spanish and Hmong. It also offers a slate of peer support groups in all three languages.

And Daisy Castillo, an experienced Valley Crisis Center employee, is now the RSVP Campus Advocate at Merced College.

"The fact that Daisy is on campus and knows our operation helps us make our services more accessible to the college community," Garcia said. "Without access or information, folks get stuck in cycles. So, when you create safe spaces with good partnerships, you can discuss very difficult topics. Survivors then realize there is support on and off campus."



Trauma-informed practice

Experiencing sexual violence makes victims feel deeply vulnerable and ashamed. For the RSVP program to make a difference, everyone on the CCRT had to commit to delivering trauma-informed care.

The philosophy acknowledges that trauma is complex and influences every part of a person's life, and that survivors need empathy and empowerment.

Officers with the Merced College Police Department, another CCRT partner, already receive training on investigating sexual violence crimes and working with victims in a respectful way through Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST). But Merced College Chief of Police Jeffrey Horn said his officers are getting so much from the trauma-informed training required by the OVW grant.

Officer Tanner Greene has completed training on sexual assault on college campuses, how to make students feel heard and supported, and working with LGBTQ+ communities.

"Sometimes even just hearing a statistic can turn on a light for us," Greene said.

For example, during a class on human trafficking, Greene was shocked to learn that 42% of people who lure victims into human trafficking are women.

"It was the way they phrased it," Greene said. "It's a more concrete version of the problem, something I can wrap my mind around and act on."

Greene added that learning more about the abuses the LGBTQ+ community regularly face will improve the entire department.

"It has not always been an easy relationship between cops and the LGBTQ+ community," he said. "Hopefully we can ease some of their fears and discomfort."

New skills and allies

Law enforcement is a different beast, since officers must adhere to Title IX and the education code, which is enforced on school grounds, along with the criminal code.

"This is my 26th year in law enforcement, and I had no idea what Title IX meant for campus law enforcement before I came here," Horn said. "Getting additional training on that is very important."

With fresh insights on their work, campus police suggested hiring a campus advocate. There was no money in the grant for it, but Munoz and Dean of Student Services Joe Serena gained permission from the state to use basic needs money to hire Castillo on a trial basis.

Said Horn, "We just felt that having an advocate working directly with the CCRT, along with the extra training and extra effort everyone is putting in, would be most effective for our goals."

The RSVP Program launched by first polling students about their needs. It dug deeper with focus groups. Then it asked for help.

Sophomore Eileen Reyes, a survivor of rape and sexual abuse from childhood, volunteered.

"I thought, if I could do it, I could help someone get out of a situation I've been in," said Reyes, 37. "But I'm always second-guessing myself. I had to gain the courage to say, 'Yes, I can help.'"

The business major serves as the RSVP Student Ambassador. Reyes has found strength by enrolling in college as an adult and sharing her own trauma story as an ally.

"Before I became a student ambassador, I would tell my story and people would get so emotional, just knowing they're not alone," she said.

RSVP exists so everyone knows that crimes like dating violence, sexual assault and stalking will not be tolerated.

"Anyone can be a victim of abuse," Reyes said. "We all want to make sure campus is a safe haven for students."

Anyone on campus who has experienced sexual assault, abuse or trauma in their lives should consider contacting the Merced College RSVP Program for help at 209-756-6446 or campus.advocate@mccd.edu.

"When you create safe spaces with good partnerships, you can discuss very difficult topics. Survivors then realize there is support on and off campus"

Lupe Garcia
Program Director, Valley Crisis Center

Profile

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Merced Native Returns Home, Finds Calling as Campus Advocate

By Luciana Chavez
Special to Merced College

Daisy Castillo didn't start her life, her college education or her career looking to work with abused women or sexual assault survivors.

But Castillo still came by her compassion and skill as the campus advocate for the new Merced College Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) program in a sincere way.

She started as the first person in her family to go to college. And then she had to start over several times more before arriving at the college in February to start this essential work.

"I think that experience also helps me stay calm during crises," said Castillo, 28. "It gives me hope for my clients when they have to start from scratch."

As the RSVP campus advocate, Castillo is the point person for survivors and program partners alike.

She runs required prevention workshops for students and staff and is always available to answer questions. She also helps survivors get the right resources to live through or leave an abusive situation, to help them navigate the process to secure restraining orders against their alleged abusers, or to simply drive and accompany survivors to court appearances as a support.

"When people hear the words sexual assault or domestic violence, it's intimidating," Castillo said. "My mission here is to make people feel safe enough to have open conversations."

The Merced native originally came to the college to study to become a dietician. Castillo dove into her nutrition classes and quickly realized that she hated math.

She left for Grand Canyon University in Arizona to try again, this time without a degree, a car or a job. She built a support network based around her community service. When she wasn't studying, Castillo was working with children in weekend programs, camps, and international mission trips.

"My identity was in Merced, but leaving here opened my mind to so much," she said. "It was validating to know I could make it out in the world."

After graduating with a B.S. in Exercise Science and an emphasis in Health Education, Castillo moved to Maryland with no family or connections to work as a chiropractic assistant. She enjoyed that time on the East Coast, but returned to Merced in 2022 to get married.

"I was excited when I got to come home and try to give back to my own community," she said. "It was great seeing how much Merced has grown, too."

Castillo took a job as a receptionist at the Valley Crisis Center upon her return and quickly learned about the unique issues surrounding sexual violence and domestic violence. She answered crisis calls and spent days on call to respond to police and hospitals if needed.

She got her first promotion fairly quickly, when she was assigned to serve as a health advocate at Le Grand High School.

"So many people don't know what the Valley Crisis Center does," she said. "I was working with teens and young adults at Le Grand High School. We focused on educating them on what sexual, domestic and intimate partner violence are to help them avoid those situations."

Castillo then took on more responsibility by accepting another promotion, this time to serve as the college's campus advocate. She remembers how empowered she felt watching one of her clients receive a restraining order.

"When they come in, you hear their story and they're just trying to get out of a bad situation," she said. "They're leaving their abuser. It may take them six, seven attempts before they're truly ready to leave. So when the restraining order gets approved, we've helped them start a new life."

Castillo must steel herself every day for what she might face. She didn't have experience in anything close to crisis intervention before being hired at the VCC.

"The more invested I became in VCC's mission and values, the more I learned," Castillo said. "That part was easy. I just love that we're providing this free service to the community and helping people at a time when they might feel alone and scared and not know what to do."

Doing that job in a familiar place is its own reward.

"Being at the college is amazing," she said. "I get a chance to reflect on who I was back when I was trying so hard to figure my life out. I'm still young, and I don't know what the future holds. Yet, I do feel very content here now."

Anyone on campus who has experienced sexual assault, abuse or trauma in their lives should consider contacting the Merced College RSVP Program for help at 209-756-6446 or campus.advocate@mccd.edu.

"When people hear the words sexual assault or domestic violence, it's intimidating. My mission here is to make people feel safe enough to have open conversations."

Daisy Castillo
Campus Advocate, Merced College

Carissa Hansford

Manager, Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) Program

Welcome, Carissa

What is your role at Merced College?

The RSVP Program was established by a grant from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), which is part of U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). My primary role is to oversee the daily operations of the grant. This means I coordinate programming to empower our students to understand and prevent sexual violence, ensure 24/7 confidential support is available to survivors, and ensure campus response to sexual violence accounts for survivor safety and well-being.

What part of your job do you enjoy most?

I fully believe in the importance of what I do, and every day I witness the positive impact of the RSVP Program on Merced College. We are truly creating a safer and more supportive campus. Seeing this unfold in real time is highly rewarding.

Tell us about yourself. What brought you to Merced College?

I worked in student services at three previous institutions, but when I arrived at Merced College I knew I'd found my forever home. Working with community college students is very fulfilling. I also enjoy the positive, supportive environment here.

What do you like to do outside of work?

I love to read, travel, and spend time with my husband and two children.

How can students and staff at Merced College contribute to creating a safer campus environment and preventing sexual violence?

We all have a role in creating a safer campus. Attend an RSVP Program workshop, or schedule one for your student group or class. Educate yourself on campus policy, and remember that there is an advocate on site. Hang a prevention poster in your office. Join the Coordinated Community Response Team. Students can also join the RSVP Program as Peer Educators.

In your view, what are the most significant challenges in addressing sexual violence in college settings, and how is Merced College working to overcome these challenges?

There are challenges to overcome in all aspects of addressing sexual violence, including cultural barriers, lack of resources, fear and misconceptions. Our Coordinated Community Response Team works hard to ensure our services are culturally competent and accessible, but there is always more work to be done.

What message do you have for survivors of sexual violence within the Merced College community during Sexual Assault Awareness Month?

You are not alone. Your voice matters, your story matters, and you matter.