

Program Excellence Awards Nomination: Community Health and Safety:

Teen Advocates for Community Safety (TACS)



City of Cedar Park, Texas

The City of Cedar Park began the Teen Advocates for Community Safety (TACS) program in 2008. TACS is a year-round service learning program hosted by the Cedar Park Fire Department. TACS works with local teenagers, ages 14 to 19, to develop emergency response skills and instill citizenship values. Unlike other “Fire Explorer” or “Junior Firefighter” programs, the TACS program encompasses many facets of community service beyond firefighting.

Fast growing suburban communities are often faced with an array of complex demands from their residents, but have limited resources to address them. As a result, innovative and cost-efficient programs must be employed by local governments to meet the needs of the community. The Teen Advocates for Community Safety (TACS) program in Cedar Park, Texas demonstrates this.

The Needs that Prompted the Creation of TACS:

Cedar Park, Texas is a fast-growing, family-oriented community north of Austin. Since 1995, the City of Cedar Park’s population has grown 265%. As a result of the tremendous number of new families moving to Cedar Park, there was a need to provide teens with meaningful after-school activities. Although the community and schools offer teenage students activities such as sports and band, there were limited opportunities for students to engage with their community and serve the public. The Police and Fire departments had a variety of programs that successfully reached out to elementary age students, but the City lacked a program that worked with the teen population, which, in Cedar Park, does not typically engage with their local government.

A goal of TACS is to encourage diversity within traditionally male-dominated, homogeneous fields as well as potentially recruit future public safety personnel. The Cedar Park Fire Department, like many small to mid-sized municipal fire departments, is entirely male. The TACS program successfully exposes students of all genders and races to emergency management and public safety careers, which is an important step in succession planning.

Program Implementation and Costs:

TACS is a year-round program that encompasses many facets of public service. Program participants spend the first nine weeks of the program learning basic first responder skills. These skills will allow the program participants to be an asset to their community in the event of a large-scale disaster. Following the completion of the Emergency Response training, teens have the opportunity to do the following:

- develop public service values through giving back to the community
- develop leadership skills
- explore career possibilities in fire service, emergency management, police service, public administration, and medical fields
- work with State Congressional leaders on advocacy issues related to fire safety
- educate their peers on the importance of fire safety
- learn basic animal first aid from a local veterinarian
- learn teaching techniques to present fire safety education to Middle and Elementary age students

Participants are exposed to a vast array of experiences through the program. TACS participant Megan Dwight says, “I love TACS. It is the best. You learn so much and get to have a lot of hands-on experience.”



Figure 1 TACS students prepare for a drill.

The initial year of the program was funded through an Assistance to Firefighter Grant for \$18,856. These funds were used to train program instructors and purchase initial supplies (i.e., CPR dummies, etc). However, it is important to note that subsequent years of the program have been funded entirely through community donations and existing municipal resources. Although there is an initial cost to purchase supplies, the program can be operated in subsequent years for under \$5,000 and utilize existing personnel such as Fire Department administrators or Emergency Management personnel. Also, TACS partnered with the school district on the program. The result of this partnership is the participation of school district personnel in the program, including teachers and counselors.

Tangible and Meaningful Results:

In the eighteen months since TACS inception, the program has made several significant contributions to the Cedar Park community:

- **Program has engaged teens in local government.** The most notable contribution has been how successfully the program has instilled public service values in an age group that does not typically engage with their local government. Not only have the participants been exposed to the many facets of local government service, including emergency management, city management, and public safety, but they have also had the opportunity to participate in community service activities. Volunteering opportunities include litter pick-up, assisting the Cedar Park Fire Department in providing citizens operational smoke alarms, and volunteering at city events, such as our Fourth of July Celebration and National Night Out.

In 2009, the TACS students went to the Texas State Capitol in Austin to speak in favor of Texas House Bill 339, which prohibits teenagers from using their cell phone for phone calls and texting while driving. This exposure to the role local government plays in the larger state legislative process was eye-opening and meaningful for the participants.

- **Ninety students have participated in the program.** To date, ninety students have participated in the program of which twenty-seven have “graduated” after completing the extensive curriculum. These students have become CPR certified and have learned valuable first aid skills.



Figure 2 Participants become CPR certified.

- **Program has generated interest in local government careers, an important factor in succession planning.** After learning about the role local government plays in the community, several students have pursued internships and careers in public safety. The program has worked closely with the local community college and the University of Texas to assist students with higher education and career planning. One graduate of the program is now attending Oklahoma State University and majoring in Fire Protection Engineering. Another graduate has chosen to become a volunteer firefighter with a neighboring community. Several other students are also considering careers in public service. TACS participant parent, Robin Field, says, “The TACS program has made a big difference in my son’s life and in his future for a career in emergency medical operations.”

- **Through Peer-to-Peer training, over 3,000 children and adults have been taught important fire safety and prevention skills.** The program includes a component in which the participants are trained to serve as instructors of fire safety education for children and seniors.



Figure 3 Students teach others about safety.

- **Program encourages an increase in staff diversity.** One of the goals of TACS is to encourage diversity within traditionally male-dominated, homogeneous fields, as well as potentially recruit future public safety personnel. The program has a growing number of female participants.

Lessons Learned:

Indisputably, the TACS program has been extremely successful and exceeded the City's initial expectations. Several important lessons the City of Cedar Park has learned include:

- **Utilize your volunteers.** Although the program's costs are low relative to the number of people it impacts, it can be very time-intensive. Staff cannot lead the entire program. The Cedar Park Fire Department works with the alumni of their Community Emergency Response Team to provide additional volunteer support. Utilizing adult volunteers associated with a Citizen's Police Academy or similar organization will greatly expand the support needed to administer this program.



Figure 4 Teens learn basic animal first aid from a local veterinarian.

- **Plan, plan, plan!** Because of the wide variety of activities the students participate in, it is necessary to allow for adequate planning time to coordinate activities. Additionally, legal counsel should be advised regarding any necessary waivers of liability.

- **Partnerships are key.** One of key components of the program is how many different facets of public service it covers. By reaching out to the school district, county officials, and local businesses, you are able to expose students to many aspects of public service. For example, one of the most popular experiences for students is learning basic animal first aid from a local veterinarian.

- **Go where students are.** Teenagers do not hear about community news in the same way adult residents do. The program has found success in its recruitment efforts by utilizing the following methods:
 - *Social media, including Facebook and Twitter*
 - *Visiting area high schools during lunch hours*
 - *Word-of-mouth from program graduates*

Final Thoughts:

The TACS program has been an extremely successful program that has contributed significantly to our community. The future of TACS is bright as the number of program participants continues to grow. A program like TACS can be implemented into any community.