

Title V Services Help Steer Young Woman Through Challenges and Into Lifting Youth Voice



Sedona, a 20-year-old multicultural Latinx, endured many traumas and challenges growing up in Denver. In the neighborhood where she lived, companies targeted youth with ads for alcohol and tobacco products. She experienced inequities in access to healthy food, safe spaces for physical activity and health care. Like many other young people facing such challenges, Sedona engaged in inappropriate behaviors and was expelled from high school.

These events affected Sedona greatly and motivated her to make a positive difference in herself and her community. She began community organizing, and when she was just 16 was hired as one of the first youth advisors at Denver Public Health, which collaborates with Denver's Department of Public Health and Environment to improve the health of Denver's residents. In that role she focused on promoting healthy eating and active living by addressing the effects of the built environment on health and well-being. She also co-facilitated a coalition of young leaders that examined upstream causes of health inequities.

As a youth advisor, Sedona both received and learned about Title V

services. During a health fair at a high school she was visiting, she met Title V staff and learned about smoking prevention, supports for teen moms, and, as she put it, other “incredible and impactful” Title V programs that support health and wellness for families. The Colorado Title V program helped her mom apply for Medicaid benefits so the family could access quality health care services.

Today, Sedona majors in Peace Studies, Yoga, and Environmental Sciences at Naropa University in Boulder, Colo. She is also a youth advisor for the Colorado Title V Maternal Child Health program at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), where she uses her knowledge about and experience in public health to activate other youth. Knowing that youth engagement is a powerful protective factor for healthy youth development¹, Sedona is passionate about uplifting youth and community voices and promoting authentic youth engagement in the state's Title V programs. She provides consultations, trainings, tools, and more to improve how Title V engages young people and community members in efforts to strengthen Title V programs and services.

¹ <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/risk-and-protective-factors-youth>

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The CDPHE’s [Positive Youth Development](#) approach to adolescence creates the groundwork for engaging with young people in an effective way, and helping organizations move along the [Youth Engagement Continuum](#). That process ensures youth engagement is more than just a “check the box” item by providing skill-building opportunities for youth to move from being recipients of information and services to influencing decision-making, and eventually sharing power and leadership in making decisions with Title V staff.

By convening focus groups with young people across the state and utilizing data from [Healthy Kids Colorado](#) and other surveys, Sedona documented the health and well-being of Colorado youth, looking through a health equity lens in a State Youth Health Report. The Title V program is using the report, which Sedona describes as a “synthesis of youth voices,” to help inform the CDPHE’s Maternal and Child Health Needs Assessment.

“So often the story is written for us,” Sedona notes, “and we end up with these data points and results without understanding the complexities, or what young people think are solutions to these problems.”

Sedona collaborated with youth advisors and adults from Alaska, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia to create and present a workshop at the 2019 [AMCHP Annual Conference](#) in San Antonio, Texas. They shared lessons learned about youth engagement and led participants in interactive activities to improve their approaches to youth engagement. The information will be put to the test as Title V programs gear up for the 2020 five-year needs assessment.

For Sedona, what began as a series of unfortunate events actually “fueled my fire and led me down the amazing path to public health.”

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