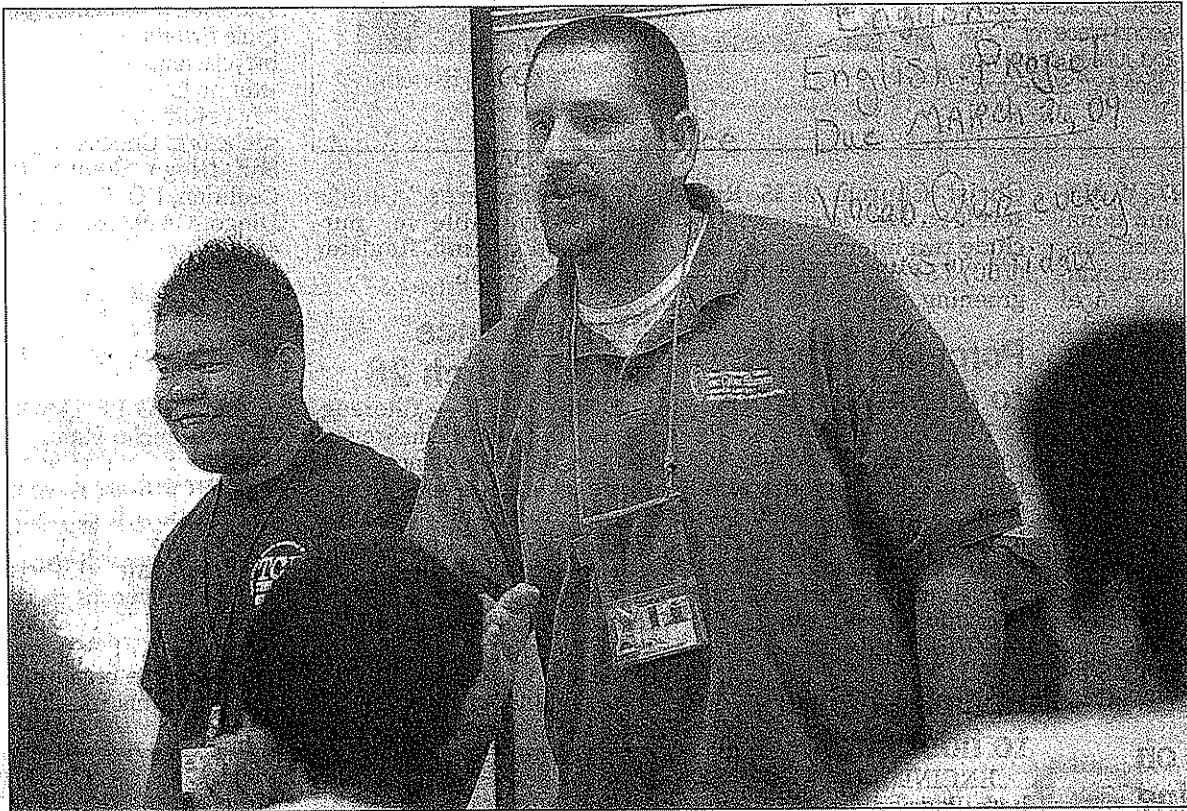


TEACHING ABOUT ONLINE DANGERS



JOHN KOSTER / FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Project coordinator Jon Moffat and health educator Nestor Venegas from the Vista Community Clinic speak to Vista High School students about dating and the Internet during an in-class presentation about online safety.

WEB OF WARNINGS

Vista Community Clinic organizes cyber-education program

STACY BRANDT
STAFF WRITER

VISTA — It can be a scary world out there in cyberspace, and local teens are helping teach their peers how to avoid some common online dangers.

About 20 students, mostly from Vista and Oceanside high schools, have participated as speakers in the Vista Community Clinic's Teen Cyber Educators

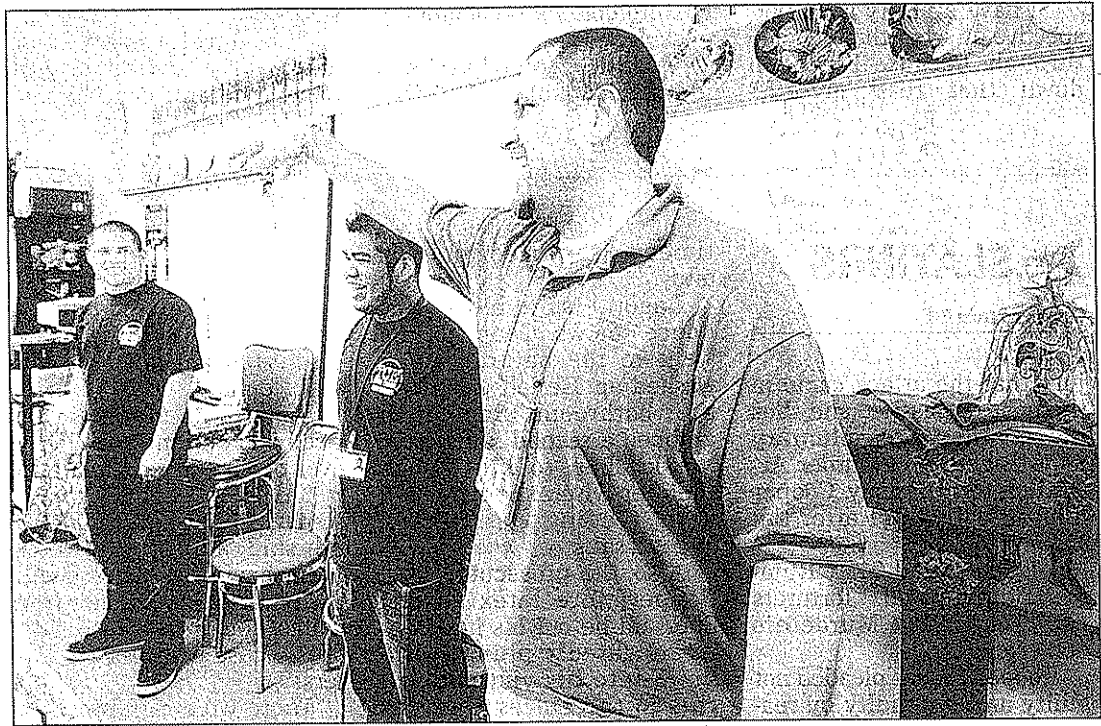
program, which has hosted a series of presentations throughout the county in the past two years.

The presentations focus on Internet-related safety issues, including identity theft, gangs, bullying, dating abuse and social networking sites.

"We may know how to push buttons and upload something on the Internet, but we don't think about how that's going to affect us," said Nestor Venegas, one of the teen educators.

So far, the cyber educators have shared their tips with nearly 1,500 students and 500 parents, speaking at schools, libraries and other public locations.

The most important things to avoid online are posting personal information or questionable photographs, said Jon Moffat, who oversees the program for the community clinic.



JOHN KOSTER / FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Project coordinator Jon Moffat with health educator Nestor Venegas and Vista High School student Josh Wilson speak to Vista High School students about dating and the internet during an in-class presentation about online safety sponsored by the Vista Community Clinic.

► WEB

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Three health classes at Vista High School heard the presentation Wednesday. Students in that group said they were surprised at some of the risks that come with posting pictures or information online.

"It's eye-opening," said sophomore Brian McMaster. "It makes you go back and look at what you have on there and make sure that it's nothing that could possibly endanger you in any way."

Teen leaders in the program must go through 25 to 30 hours of training before they can present the lessons, Moffat said. For their time, the students are credited with

community service hours, which can help them get into college or obtain jobs.

Moffat started the program nearly three years ago after noticing how dangerous online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook can be.

He said he and a co-worker visited the MySpace.com site "and started looking around."

"We were shocked at what we found ...," he said. "All this personal information about kids, underage drinking, drug use. It ran the gamut."

The program started out as simple after-school lessons by Moffat, but has grown to include teen volunteers and a variety of venues and audiences. Most presentations are between three and five hours.

Bringing in teens to help teach the lessons has been a

real plus, Moffat said, because audiences are able to relate with people closer to their age. Plus, the teens are on top of the newest trends and constantly update the lessons, he said.

The program is financed by a two-year grant from Alliance Healthcare Foundation.

Though that money is set to go away this summer, Moffat said he is confident that he will be able to find other ways to fund the program, such as donations, other grants or presentation fees.

"The need is there. The want is there," he said. "Now, we're just trying to figure out funding-wise where we're heading in the future."

Contact staff writer Stacy Brandt at (760) 901-4009 or sbrandt@nctimes.com.