

Reaching out to troubled teens

By **Liz Mineo**/ Staff Writer

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At only 19 years old, Jose Romero has experienced his share of hardships. First, when he immigrated from his native Dominican Republic seven years ago, he had to learn English and adjust to a new life in a foreign land. Then, in his last year of high school, he didn't know what to do with his life and felt he had nobody to turn to ask for help.

But Romero turned to a local program ran by a nonprofit organization that helped him get back on his feet. With that help, Romero finished his studies, prepared to attend college and found a job.

Now Romero, who is majoring in business management at Framingham State College and works as a customer service representative for a medical alert company, wants to help other teens.

But he's not going to do it alone.

With another 30 teens that are members of Wayside Youth & Family Support Network's Community Links Youth Advisory Council, Romero hopes to reach out to teens in trouble through a Web site that will offer resources, advice and a forum to chat with their peers.

"We wanted to reach a larger group of kids," said Romero, referring to why they conceived the idea of a Web site. "What better way to lead them in the right direction and let them ask questions in a private manner than through the Internet?"

The Web site will be created, managed and maintained by the teens thanks to a \$5,000 grant from the TD Banknorth Charitable Foundation. The grant was awarded in June, and the teens are already working to have the Web site up and running within two months, said Gissi Cruz, outreach worker with Community Links.

"It'll be a safe Web site," said Cruz. "It won't be like myspace.com. It will be a place for teens to come together and help each other."

The Web site (www.communitylinksinfo.org) will be accessible through Wayside's Web site and will include information, resources and a question-and-answer section on issues such as peer pressure, drugs, sex and sexuality, suicide, HIV, pregnancy and other topics of interest among teens. The Web site will be managed by the teens with Cruz's help, but it will be the teens who run the show.

That's the best part of the project, said Jeanne Ryan, Wayside's director of development.

"It won't be adults lecturing to kids," said Ryan. "It will be teens helping their peers."

Maria T. Wilson, vice president of TD Banknorth Community Relations, feels the same way.

In a press release, Wilson said, "The Web site will provide valuable information about community resources to at risk-teens while giving Youth Advisory Council members an opportunity in skill building, empowerment and management."

Wayside's Community Links program was created in 1998 after the murder of a local teen and serves about 2,000 teens a year. The program relies on outreach workers and volunteers who walk neighborhoods providing street outreach to homeless and at-risk teens.

Having a Web site will help reach out more teens that are experiencing difficulties at home and don't know where to turn to, said Romero.

"As teens, we know what problems teens experience," said Romero. "It will be kids helping other kids. We thought that was the best we, as teens, could do for other teens."