

BREAKING THE CYCLE

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Health Care Summit and Theatrical Event Offer a Youth Perspective on Prevention

Teen pregnancy is a community-wide challenge and solving the problem requires a variety of strategies. Getting feedback from youth, the population that is affected the most, is crucial for program success. *Breaking the Cycle* is involving youth on many fronts as we continue our work to mobilize the community to take action on this critical public health issue.

Teens played an instrumental role in two recent *Breaking the Cycle* events, and their involvement was invaluable. A panel of youth provided input to health care providers and policy makers on the types of reproductive health services they need at a summit on health care interventions to reduce teen pregnancy. And a motivated young woman wrote a play about the importance of parental communication in preventing teen pregnancy and got other youth involved in producing it. (See sidebar.)

Protecting Hartford's Teens:

A Summit on Health Care Interventions to Reduce Teen Pregnancy



What are the next steps we need to take to improve, expand and promote "teen friendly" preventive health care services, education and counseling to break the cycle of teen pregnancy?

These issues were on the table at a December health care summit, attended by 85 health care practitioners, community leaders, school officials, policy makers and youth. The conference was funded by a grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

The day began with opening remarks by Rev. Edwin Ayala, Assistant Director of the Christian Activities Council and Board member of the Hartford Action Plan on Infant Health. Mayor Eddie Perez and Superintendent Robert Henry each gave welcoming statements that stressed the importance of, and their support for, the summit conference objectives. Halley Faust, MD, MPH, and Action Plan Board member then gave the first presentation of the day -- an overview of the teen pregnancy problem in Hartford. This was followed by an informative and thought-provoking presentation jointly given by two nationally-recognized experts in the field of adolescent health care: Claire Brindis, *DrPH, Executive Director of the National Adolescent Health Information Center and Professor, Division of Adolescent Medicine, University of CA*, and Jonathan Klein, *MD, MPH, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and of Community and Preventative Medicine, University of Rochester*. Their presentation reviewed the relevant national data and research findings on trends in teen pregnancy, adolescent risk behavior and resilience factors, along with adolescent preventive care guidelines. They also cited numerous examples of "best practice" programs and interventions underway in several sites around the country.

A youth panel, moderated by Dr. Eddie Davis, State Dept. of Education and Action Plan Board member, gave participants first-hand accounts of what it is like to be a youth seeking health care services today. The youth were eloquent about their experiences -- some successful, others much less so -- in getting the services they believe they need. Chief among their recommendations: physicians must take the time to develop relationships with youth if they expect to successfully engage in discussions of risk behavior and prevention methods. Concerns about confidentiality, not knowing where to go on their own, lack of "teen-friendly" systems and cultural competency are other important factors that create barriers for teens. These issues point to the need for action, not only on the part of health care practitioners, but by managed care plans as well.

The event also recognized the Hartford Public Schools for providing comprehensive health education and access to reproductive health care services for students through its school-based health centers. Leah O'Neill Fichtner, Director of Health Services, was given an award for her many years of involvement in expanding the Hartford Public Schools' health education curriculum and for implementing a protocol to make contraception available at the school-based health centers.

Afternoon sessions focused on action items for the community to move forward in changing the landscape of health care services for teens. Ideas included:

- *Promoting skill development to help parents talk to their kids about sex, risk taking, their futures; helping adults learn how they can be advocates for expansion of teen friendly preventive health services in the city.*
- *Tapping into our community's teens as resources to help educate health care providers and to educate other teens about their legal rights when seeking reproductive health care -- in short, realize and utilize the Power of Youth!*
- *Making sure that our efforts are reaching all adolescents in the city -- giving them information on opportunities and services available to them.*
- *Encouraging each participant to think about what they can do next -- next week, next month -- in their own organization to address the issues and implement the ideas raised at the conference.*

Breaking the Cycle is moving forward to continue the momentum generated at this exciting event. A report from the conference will be available later this month. We are also developing a ListServe, where people can discuss issues, share ideas and information, and move forward with an agenda that will get results. To join the ListServe, or for more information about next steps, contact Maureen Mullen, (860) 236-4872 or e-mail maureenm@pariskygroup.com.

Right: A panel of Hartford youth discussed their experiences with the health care system and advocated for improvements in teen-friendly reproductive health services at "Protecting Hartford Teens: A Summit on Health Care Interventions to Reduce Teen Pregnancy" in December. From left to right are: David Soto, Darren Johnson, Axlaine Maisonet, Nazmi Ojeda, Yessenia Santiago and Wajjha Kazmi. **Far Right:** Leah O'Neill Fichtner received an award for her leadership in improving health education and access to reproductive health care for students in the Hartford Public Schools. Pictured with Ms. Fichtner is Rev. Edwin Ayala, Board member of the Hartford Action Plan on Infant Health. Photos by Laura Stone.



**Wake Up! ¡Dile la verdad!
(Tell them the truth!)**

Two Hartford families and their approaches to teen sexuality was the theme in *Wake up! ¡Dile la Verdad! (Tell Them the Truth!)*, presented in December at M.D. Fox School. The play centers around two Latina teens, their attempts to learn more about sex, and how their parents handle it. It was written by Jannett Campos, a senior at CCSU who graduated from Hartford Public High School.

"Growing up in Hartford, I saw it all," says Campos. "Violence, drugs, teen pregnancy, crime. I barely made it though school myself, and it wasn't until my senior year that I even thought about the future."

Campos assumed she'd just get a job, but when she started looking, all of the interesting jobs required degrees. So she enrolled in community college and earned a degree in Criminal Justice. It was during that time she realized she wanted to do something to help local youth -- kids who reminded her of herself when she was growing up.

"It seems like the kids who need the most help -- the delinquent ones, the trouble-makers, are the ones the teachers give up on," she said.

Her research led her to Jack Cullin at *Breaking the Cycle*, who asked Jannett for ideas about how to encourage parents to talk to their kids about sex. Jannett thought a play might work and committed to writing it.

Jannett found teen actors for the play at Mi Casa, where she had worked as a youth program coordinator. They rehearsed at Pope Park Recreation Center twice a week throughout the fall.

"I hope the play will give people an idea of how teens really live, and motivate parents to change the way they communicate," she said.

Breaking the Cycle is planning to film the play and make it available, along with a discussion guide, to other Hartford organizations. The dialogue is in Spanglish (a combination of English and Spanish). The content is appropriate for parents and upper-elementary to high school youth. If you would like more information, contact Jack Cullin at (860) 236-4872 or jackc@pariskygroup.com.

This initiative was funded by the City of Hartford CDBG program; CT Dept. of Social Services Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative; United Technologies; and Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center Healthy People 2010.



Right: Jannett Campos had a vision to help at-risk youth avoid teen pregnancy.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Building consensus: one person, one neighborhood, one language at a time

The issues of age-appropriate and culturally-appropriate preventive measures are being addressed in several other ways: through a pilot community action initiative in the Barry Square and Frog Hollow neighborhoods, and through communication plans being developed by representatives from Hartford's diverse Latino community.

After completing preliminary work in Barry Square and Frog Hollow to assess youth and health provider views on the issues of teen pregnancy and reproductive health services, a Community Action Group was formed. The idea behind this initiative is that each neighborhood has a unique history, along with resources and strengths that can be brought together to create change, if given a voice.

Breaking the Cycle partnered with the Aetna Center for Families to recruit participants for the Action Group and to plan and organize meetings. The group, called *Teens United in Health*, includes both youth and adults from the two neighborhoods. Their objective is to identify actions to assure that teens have access to preventive reproductive health care services and education, and to involve the community in undertaking those actions. The group has developed a preliminary list of ideas and plans to implement some of them this spring. For more information on *Teens United in Health*, contact Maureen Mullen at (860) 236-4872 or maureenm@pariskygroup.com, or Nilda Santana at the Aetna Center for Families at (860) 757-6283 or nilda.santana@hartnet.org.



Of the births to teens in Hartford during 2000, 57% were to Latinas.

Just as each neighborhood has unique characteristics that affect teen pregnancy prevention efforts, each population in Hartford has its own distinct ethnic and cultural heritage that plays a role in how prevention strategies should be designed. A message that is appropriate for Hartford's African-American population may not be as effective for its Latino population.

Breaking the Cycle has long recognized the importance of relevant prevention work within the Latino community, which has both the highest population number of teens and the highest incidence of teen pregnancy in our city. Of the births to teens in Hartford during 2000, 57% were to Latinas. A Latino Strategy committee was developed two years ago to research issues relating to teen pregnancy, resulting in several initiatives including Spanish-language training for parents to talk to their children about sexuality.

Even with the success of these training programs, it remains especially important to find other ways to reach Latino parents, who are traditionally reticent to discuss these issues with their children. Another action group was formed this fall to develop communication strategies to increase awareness of the teen pregnancy problem within the Latino community. The group will be developing campaign ideas for rollout later this year. For more information, contact Jack Cullin at (860) 236-4872 or jackc@pariskygroup.com.

Program Updates

PSI The Postponing Sexual Involvement Program continues to work toward reaching all 5th graders in Hartford's 26 elementary schools during the 2002-2003 school year. The program is also investigating the feasibility of running PSI classes in 3 special education classes at Martin Luther King School. The PSI teen leaders at Bulkeley High school were filmed teaching a recent class at Dwight School as part of an upcoming Special Assignment on Teen Pregnancy produced by Fox 61 TV. The special is scheduled for broadcast during February 2003. For more information, contact Laura Stone at (860) 236-4872 or lauras@pariskygroup.com.

Lynn Jolicoeur from Fox 61 TV films a recent PSI session in Mrs. O'Connor's 5th grade class at Dwight School. The filming was part of research for a Special Assignment on Teen Pregnancy to be broadcast later this month.
Photo by Laura Stone.



AOS The Always on Saturday program resumed in October. Two out of the three sites have full enrollment: over 20 youth have been consistently attending both the Albany Avenue Girls and Albany Avenue Boys programs. Thirteen girls have attended the Sanchez Girls site.

Core elements of the Always on Saturday curriculum have been developed as a "Best Practices in Teen Pregnancy Prevention" initiative. The intent of this initiative is to offer the curriculum, along with training, to other Hartford organizations who wish to add a teen pregnancy prevention component to their programming. Several organizations, including OPMAD, the Urban League, the Hispanic Health Council, Southend Knightriders and Hartford Neighborhood Centers have recently partnered with *Breaking the Cycle* to train their staff members. Through these partnerships, we will reach children in elementary school through high school in at least six different city neighborhoods. If you are interested in adding this prevention component to your organization's programming, contact Alice Liebowitz at (860) 236-4872 or alicel@pariskygroup.com.

HAP The Hartford Action Plan on Infant Health received the **Audrey Nelson Award** for community development achievement at an awards luncheon in Washington, D.C., on January 24, 2003. The award was established in 1987 to recognize exemplary and innovative uses of community development block grant funds to address the needs of low- and moderate-income families, homes and neighborhoods. The Action Plan was nominated by the Department of Grants Management, which administers the CDBG program for Hartford. We were one of only six recipients of the award, out of over 550 cities across the U.S.

May is Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month!
For information about local activities, contact
Laura Stone at (860) 236-4872 or lauras@pariskygroup.com.

ON THE NATIONAL SCENE

Abstinence-Only Education on the Rise

For the fiscal year 2003, President Bush proposed spending \$135 million on abstinence-only education programs. According to Administration officials, that dollar amount will achieve parity with what is currently spent on family planning programs. However, with few new dollars allocated for teen pregnancy prevention in general, this means there will be less money for comprehensive health education programs.

Advocates for comprehensive education, which encourages abstinence but also provides information on contraception, are concerned about this trend. People on both sides of the issue would agree that abstinence for young teens is preferred. However, the abstinence-only approach allows no discussion of contraception and may leave many teens who do not choose to be abstinent unprepared to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancies or sexually-transmitted diseases.

There are an estimated 700 abstinence programs currently in place in all 50 states, and one third of all schools teach abstinence until marriage. Proponents of abstinence-only education note that a recent, controversial report from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) stated that while condoms are effective in preventing HIV and pregnancy, there is not enough data to demonstrate the effectiveness rates for other STDs. Success stories, such as those described in a recent *Newsweek* article, and recent CDC data that shows the rate of teen sex is in decline, are also cited as evidence that abstinence works.

Advocates for comprehensive health education counter that no research demonstrates that abstinence-only programs are effective, while there is clear data that shows comprehensive sex education increases the rate at which teens choose to protect themselves, without increasing sexual activity. In addition, they note that the NIH report on condom effectiveness has been roundly criticized for poor methodology, ignoring several important studies that show condoms are effective. The abstinence-only approach has also been criticized for its heavy reliance on scare tactics and religious ideology to effect behavior change.

Money for abstinence programs comes through a variety of funding streams. How a program is funded determines the components of the curriculum. Some funding streams allow for more flexibility in including information related to contraception. Others restrict information on contraception to failure rates or prevent any information from being presented at all.

Debate over this issue will likely continue throughout 2003 and beyond. *Breaking the Cycle* encourages individuals who are concerned with increases in abstinence-only education to advocate for comprehensive health education with their congressional representatives.

In another alarming development, The American Educational Research Association in conjunction with the American Library Association has issued an alert regarding the purging from Federal government web sites of information that either does not fit with the current administration's ideology or is "outdated."

"... web information removal activities are occurring throughout the federal system." On October 21, a group of 12 House Members sent a letter to Secretary Tommy Thompson, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, identifying "a pattern of events at the Department of Health and Human Services suggesting that scientific decision-making is being subverted by ideology and that scientific information that does not fit the Administration's political agenda is being suppressed ... Scientific information that does not serve the Administration's ideological agenda is being removed from HHS websites. Health issues involved include abortion, programs addressing risky behavior in youth, and contraception. Other federal government Web sites are reported to be facing similar problems." For more information see <http://www.aera.net/communications/news/federal.htm>.

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