



We Must Unite to Reduce Teen Pregnancy

Before I begin to tell you about the North Texas Alliance to Reduce Teen Pregnancy, I imagine you want to know whether the group's goals align with your values. Maybe you're looking for code words like "faith-based" or "abstinence-plus."

But teen pregnancy is nonpartisan. That's why a successful initiative to reduce teen pregnancy in North Texas must also be nonpartisan. So let's start from a platform where we can all agree: Lowering the teen pregnancy rate is a good idea.

While worldwide teen pregnancy rates have declined from their peak in 1991, U.S. rates (29 girls in 1,000) are still much higher than the rest of the industrialized world, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (thenationalcampaign.org).

Texas has the fifth-highest rate in the U.S. (44.4 in 1,000), and some of the hottest spots in the state are here in Dallas. When 76 to 100 teen girls out of 1,000 get pregnant, that is on par with Third World numbers.

If a teen doesn't finish high school — 38 percent of teen moms don't — then she will struggle to find good employment. Teen moms often need expensive public services like food stamps, welfare, housing subsidies, foster programs and Medicaid. Statistics show their children are more likely to live in single-parent households, and they are likely to experience poverty. These children often repeat the cycle of hardship, by becoming teen parents themselves, or even entering the prison system.

But didn't I say the rates are declining? If that's true, why do we need an alliance in North Texas?

The national decline in teen pregnancy didn't happen magically. It was achieved through strategic effort, spearheaded by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, founded in 1996. Since then they've been helping local governments, schools and health care providers get access to data that document effective solutions. Their effort spurred the founding of the Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (txcampaign.org), based in Austin. Part of their mission is to "move beyond polarizing political discourse and social norms that discourage constructive conversation about adolescent sexual health."

Polarizing political discourse? About sex education? In Texas?

You see the problem. People can hear us hollering as far away as New York City.

Enter Dallas lawyer, mom and volunteer Terry Greenberg. Her kids attend schools in Richardson ISD — a great district struggling to educate all kids, including kids who have their own kids. Greenberg organized NTARuPT to help boost the local effort to reduce teen pregnancy rates.

"When I looked around, I saw a lot of organizations working on the problem, but they weren't working together," Greenberg said. "They don't always know about each other. Matching the right clients to the right services is harder than it should be." With help from the Dallas Women's Foundation and the Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, she facilitated the creation of an alliance of providers, to make it easier for clients to find the services they need.

At NTARuPT's meetings, groups as diverse as RISD, Fort Worth ISD, the Skillful Living Center (promoting faith-based abstinence), the Dallas Police Department, Alley's House (promoting empowerment of teen moms) and Planned Parenthood (promoting evidence-based sex education) all contribute staffing and resources.

What happens when you get a group of diverse, passionate, caring people together in the same room to talk about solutions?

A lot of mutual respect. I love what I've seen so far.

On Thursday, NTARuPT is hosting a launch party in the Dallas Design District to bring together concerned stakeholders in Dallas. That includes government leaders, faith leaders, educators, related organizations and supporters who can donate time or resources.

Can a diverse group of North Texans can get together and keep the goal of reducing teen pregnancy front and center?

We can, and we will.