COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

CASE STUDIES Strategies for Engaging the Faith Community in Teen Pregnancy Prevention Efforts: Lessons Learned in Augusta, GA and Philadelphia, PA

THE NEED

The Richmond County area of east central Georgia has a population of approximately 198,111 residents, 15,883 are between the ages of 15 and 19. Richmond County reported a teen birth rate of 68.7 per 1,000 girls age 15-19 in 2006, well above the national teen birth rate of 41 per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 for the same year. In addition to a high birth rate, Richmond County reported a teen pregnancy rate of 92.8 per 1000 teens and 30.9% of teen pregnancies were repeat pregnancies. The sexually transmitted disease (STD) rate for teens age 15-19 in Richmond County was 42.4 per 1,000.

In the West and Southwest Philadelphia neighborhoods of Pennsylvania teen girls age 15-19 experience similarly high teen birth rates to those in Richmond County. The 2007 teen birth rate for this Philadelphia community was 76 per 1,000 girls age 15-19. The city of Philadelphia is also characterized by high rates of STDs and HIV/AIDS and additional indicators of teen reproductive health risks. According to the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS) published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), female Philadelphia public high school students had the highest percentages of first sexual intercourse before 13 years of age (6.0% vs a median of 3.8%) and four or more lifetime sexual partners (16.8% vs a median of 11.7%) when compared to their counterparts in other metropolitan areas. The YRBS findings highlight the high level of risk for unintended pregnancy among youth in Philadelphia.

BACKGROUND

In 2010, AccessMatters (formerly the Family Planning Council) and the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power and Potential (GCAPP) were awarded cooperative agreements made available through collaboration between the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH) Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) and the CDC to address the high teen birth rates in these communities. The specific purpose of the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention: Integrating Services, Programs, and Strategies Through Community-wide Initiatives project is to demonstrate the effectiveness of innovative, multicomponent, community-wide initiatives in reducing rates of teen pregnancy and births in communities with the highest rates, with a focus on reaching African American and Latino/Hispanic youth age 15–19. AccessMatters and GCAPP were two of nine organizations to receive funding. Specifically, AccessMatters and GCAPP are both working to engage members of the faith community in their areas to assist with evidence-based, community-wide teen pregnancy prevention (TPP) efforts.

The Community-wide Initiative focuses on five key components:

1. Community Mobilization and Sustainability: Engaging all sectors of the population in a community-wide effort to address teen pregnancy prevention. This component involves the creation of community partner groups.
made up of diverse civic stakeholders that help guide and provide input to the planning and implementation of the initiative.

**Evidence-Based Programs:** Providing teens with evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs.

**Increasing Youth Access to Contraceptive and Reproductive Health Care Services:** Ensuring clinical partners are providing teen friendly, culturally competent reproductive health care services and establishing links between youth serving organizations and clinics.

**Stakeholder Education:** Educating civic leaders, parents, and other community members about evidence-based strategies to reduce teen pregnancy.

**Working with Diverse Communities:** Raising awareness of the link between teen pregnancy and social determinants of health, and ensuring accessible and culturally and linguistically appropriate programs and reproductive health care services.

Both organizations recognized that working closely with the faith community would provide them access to youth with whom they might not otherwise interact.

**FAITH AND TEEN PREGNANCY**

Research shows that religion and faith play an important role in preventing teen pregnancy. Attachment to a faith community or religious organization is a protective factor to prevent teen pregnancy. Among teen that have never had sex, the majority said that the main reason they didn't have sex was that it was against their religion or morals. Many people, both teens and adults, believe that faith leaders should be doing something to prevent teen pregnancy in their communities. Faith leaders are often key figures in the community and serve a wide range of people. Given these facts, faith leaders are an important stakeholder in community-wide initiatives to prevent teen pregnancy. Both GCAPP and AccessMatters recognized the importance of these leaders and began to engage members of the faith community.

**EFFORTS TO ENGAGE FAITH COMMUNITIES**

Both Richmond County, GA and West/Southwest Philadelphia, PA have very active faith communities. Project staff at GCAPP and AccessMatters used data gathered through community needs assessments to determine that faith leaders in their target communities would be valuable champions to their community-wide TPP efforts. Both organizations recognized that working closely with the faith community would provide them access to youth with whom they might not otherwise interact. The first step towards engaging the faith community was identifying key leaders and creating a plan to build relationships with them.

In order to begin building relationships between faith leaders and project staff, both GCAPP and AccessMatters examined their existing connections: evaluating personal relationships with clergy; identifying members of their core partner groups who might be active members of a faith community; and reaching out to those community leaders who were already supportive of the TPP project and members of a church, synagogue, or mosque within the community. Both grantees completed environmental scans to identify existing places of worship in Richmond County and West/Southwest Philadelphia and to gather a list of potential partners.

**GCAPP’S EFFORTS**

GCAPP’s Community Advisory Council (CAC), a leadership group composed of community members who provide...
direction and guidance to the TPP project, determined that engaging the faith community in Richmond County would be critical to success to GCAPP’s primary TPP program, the We Are Change project. Two members of the CAC, Reverend Luther Felder, a United Methodist Minister, and Rabbi Robert Klensin, helped establish a faith-based sub-committee to address engaging the faith community. Using community needs assessment data from the first year of the project (2010), the CAC faith-based sub-committee knew there was interest in the We Are Change initiative from the faith community. The sub-committee members reached out to Reverend Millicent West, a prominent leader in the Richmond County faith community and a strong supporter of the We Are Change initiative, to collaborate on increasing TPP efforts within the faith community. Reverend West worked closely with other faith leaders, starting a door-to-door/church-to-church campaign to raise awareness of the We Are Change initiative and personally invite faith leaders to attend meetings to discuss the project and teen pregnancy prevention. The CAC faith-based sub-committee members and Reverend West were able to leverage their existing relationships with clergy as well as their positions as respected members of the faith community to build support for the project.

Through the efforts of the CAC faith-based sub-committee, Reverend West, and their fellow faith leaders, GCAPP was able to successfully convene a luncheon in the summer of 2013 including 15 prominent members of the faith community. Participants were provided with an overview of the We Are Change TPP program and invited to join the project as a supporter and/or partner. GCAPP project staff shared information on the importance of linking sexually active youth in the faith community to teen friendly clinical services. GCAPP project staff also aired a short video to illustrate how faith leaders can get involved in teen pregnancy prevention and facilitated a discussion following the viewing. Some of the topics discussed included:

- How can we get this information into our churches?
- How can we get evidence-based programs to youth?
- How can we involve parents in this issue?

Participants discussed partnership strategies that included implementing an evidence-based TPP program, providing space for the implementation of such a program in their congregation, promoting an evidence-based program among their congregants as a recruitment strategy, or addressing the issue through sermons/outreach among their congregants. Participants were also given a forum to share any other youth development activities they were involved in throughout Richmond County, and collaboration and partnership among faith leaders was encouraged and embraced.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Many clergy are hesitant to speak about a sensitive topic like teen pregnancy. Often clergy fear backlash from the community or worry about job
security, so approaching an issue like TPP can be challenging. There is strength in numbers. Providing a forum for faith leaders to come together to discuss this issue provides the support some leaders may need to address the problem, speak out about TPP with their congregants, or help others to do so.

It’s important to gain buy-in from gatekeepers in faith communities. While not always easy, it is critical to gain buy-in from key gatekeepers in order to engage the faith community more broadly in this work. This takes time and patience and involves building relationships on an individual level and leveraging existing relationships between project champions and members of their faith communities.

The messenger matters. When recruiting members of the faith community to join in TPP efforts, it may help to recruit other faith leaders to do outreach. In Richmond County, members of the faith community who were active on We Are Change leadership teams met with pastors individually to dispel myths, create buy-in, and hear concerns.

Engage faith partners from the beginning. Just like any other group, when involving the faith community in an initiative it is important to include representatives early on in the process in order to create genuine enthusiasm for the project from the beginning.

Data speaks. Some members of the faith community were unaware of national data highlighting parental support for evidence-based TPP programs and the importance of parent-child communication about sex. And some members of the faith community feared that talking about sex might be perceived as supporting it. Sharing this key research was helpful to get clergy on board with the We Are Change Initiative. Sharing these data also helped illustrate the need for such a project in Richmond County.

ACCESSMATTERS EFFORTS
AccessMatters’ I MATTER Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program began their outreach to the faith community by meeting with various community groups including:

- The Philadelphia Mayor’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives and the University of Pennsylvania’s Chaplain’s Office which provided connections to various congregations in the community as well as other organizations with ties to the faith community.
- FIGHT, a faith-based organization focused on HIV/AIDS, who invited I MATTER to attend regular meetings and present on teen pregnancy prevention.
- CityLights, a community-based organization that informs the residents of Southwest Philadelphia about resources and activities, provided 75 copies Tips to Help Faith Leaders and their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy to their faith-based organization partners.

Philadelphia Faith-Based Organizations Represented:
Bethanna
Common Place Ministry
Department of Behavioral Health Faith & Spiritual Affairs Unit
Masjidullah Islamic Family Center
Mother Bethel AME Church
Victory Christian Center
Vineyard Community Church

Following these meetings, I MATTER hosted a forum for faith leaders on June 19, 2014 to engage in discussions about teen pregnancy prevention and the faith community. The goal of this meeting was to introduce various faith-based organizations to the I MATTER project and identify ways they might make an impact on teen pregnancy. Participants were presented with information about current teen birth data, social ecological
model, adolescent sexual behavior, and approaches to preventing teen pregnancy. In small groups, participants discussed and ranked their support for four teen pregnancy prevention models: abstinence education, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), asset building (based on the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets), and positive youth development. CSE was listed as the most difficult to support while positive youth development and abstinence education ranked as the easiest.

Each participant shared how their respective faith community engaged youth or families and how those strategies might support teen pregnancy prevention. Some ideas included opening the building to community use and providing space for meeting and activities; being a resource to other faith communities; and connecting the I MATTER program with the church drop-in center. I MATTER plans to continue to engage with attendees and other who were unable to attend through one-on-one meetings and discussions about how they can collaborate. Over the next year, I MATTER plans to work with three faith communities as a partner in their efforts to prevent teen pregnancy.

“Over the next year, I MATTER plans to work with three faith communities as a partner in their efforts to prevent teen pregnancy.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Relationships are integral to developing partnerships with the faith community. Developing relationships with organizations and leaders who are connected to the faith community is one step towards forging new partnerships. When I MATTER connected with the Mayor’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, Office of the Chaplain at the University of Pennsylvania, and FIGHT HIV/AIDS faith leaders, many doors were opened to connect with faith groups in the community. Relationship building takes time and persistence; one meeting or interaction will not secure a partnership.

Meeting one-on-one/face-to-face with faith communities strengthens relationship and builds trust. I MATTER found that when meeting with leaders of faith-based organizations, in-person, one-on-one meetings were most successful. In larger, more impersonal settings, they noted a reluctance to ask questions and a concern from faith leaders that a discussion about teen pregnancy may be confrontational. Although sensitive topics like abortion, abstinence-only education, and at-risk youth were discussed, one-on-one meetings enabled open, honest, and non-judgmental conversations.

Listen to communities of faith.

Before approaching a faith community, find out what they do and what they believe. Initially, I MATTER offered a teen pregnancy prevention curriculum to communities of faith without researching their practices, values, and beliefs. This was not well received. I MATTER changed their approach and learned about the faith communities before offering resources. This helped develop a better understanding of how and where they could incorporate teen pregnancy prevention into the faith leaders' existing work.

Communities of faith may already be engaged in teen pregnancy prevention and just not know it. I MATTER found that several faith communities were already engaged in prevention activities about healthy decision making, building youth assets, and positive youth development, all of which help support teen pregnancy prevention efforts. When speaking with faith-based organizations, make the connection between the work they are already doing and other teen pregnancy prevention efforts.
This Case Study was developed using information gathered from written materials and interviews with Dianne Browne, Director of I MATTER Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program at AccessMatters, Donna Elliston, former Project Director, GCAPP, and Mary Stacy, Senior Clinical Services Coordinator at GCAPP.

This project is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and is supported by grant number 1U58DP002916-04. Materials developed as part of this project are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC. The National Campaign wishes to thank the CDC for its support of this resource.

About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy:

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign’s mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.