

The Buck Stops Here

Local Program Deals With Teen Pregnancy

by Melissa Keith

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A local program to pay teenage mothers a dollar a day not to become pregnant has generated statewide attention and some controversy since the announcement in February.

Susan Christofferson, director of the Nurturing Center in Kalispell, said the announcement made front page news in most major state papers, and she has spent the last two weeks discussing the topic on radio programs in the valley and in Lewistown.

Not scheduled to begin until later this month, the program has already come under some attack.

"Paying a teenager \$1 a day not to get pregnant is one of the most wasteful, short-sighted and morally reprehensible ideas that has been proposed lately," was one comment that appeared in a Great Falls Tribune editorial on Monday.

Reprehensible or not, the idea is not new. The program originated ten years ago in Colorado, and the 83 percent success rate there, combined with the alarming number of repeat pregnancies to teenagers here, is what prompted Christofferson to develop a similar program for the area.

Christofferson said that while she honors the opinions of those who may be opposed to the idea of paying teenagers not to get pregnant, as a realist she is interested in what works, and one way to reach young people is by using a non-traditional approach.

least four years older than the girls.

"The younger the mother is the older the father," she said, is the rule on the national level, but that it also applies to local cases. Faced with raising children alone, many teenage mothers feel a sense of hopelessness and Christofferson said that as facilitator of the program she will work with participants to develop a sense of unity and support. Rather than working to model appropriate behavior she said she wants to establish self-esteem and a sense of direction in their lives, a sense of hope.

"They are part of the community and need to see themselves as contributors, not drains," and she said they will be asked to determine what it is they need to change the course of their life.

Others will be asked the same question.

Christofferson said that she would like to challenge the American Association of University Women to study 100 successful families to determine what contributes to their success. She said those that work with troubled families already know what contributes to the failure, and poverty is one key factor that creates many barriers to success.

"Most live in horrendous poverty," she said of the young mothers, and the \$7 each week is an incentive to keep them in a program that will afford them the opportunity to ma-

The Facts of Life:

Montana Releases statistics on Teen Pregnancy

A study of the trends in teenage pregnancy for the past 12 years was released by the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences in February. Here is an overview of the study prepared by Sandra Hale and a comparison of Flathead County with other counties in the state.

- Between 1980 and 1991, the total number of pregnancies, live births and induced abortions declined for all Montana teens, yet during that period the number of out-of-wedlock births increased from 42 percent to 72 percent.

- The pregnancy rate for 15-19 year old teens in Montana increased from 64.9 per 1,000 teen women in 1986 to 71.5 in 1991. In Flathead county the rate is higher than 44 other counties at 77.1 per 1,000 teens. As part of the national picture, birth rates and abortion rates remain below U.S. levels and are some of the lowest rates among the states.

- Approximately one-third of the total births to Montana teens in 1991 were to women 17 years old and younger; one percent of the teen births were to women under 15 years. The proportions have not changed in the last ten years.

- The percentage of out-of-wedlock births to 15-19 year old teens in Montana has risen from 42 percent to over 70 percent in 1991.

- In approximately half of the births to all teens in Montana, the father is four or more years older than the mother. If the mother is under 17 years of age and married, the father is almost always four or more years older.

- Seventy-five percent of all teens giving birth in Montana received Medicaid benefits for prenatal care and delivery and one year of pediatric care of their babies. This totals approximately \$4.5 million in Medicaid expenditures in Montana in one year.

- The average cost for an "at risk" 16 year old to receive a physical exam, pap smear, related lab work, counseling, and to receive a year's worth of birth control pills from a Title X Family Planning clinic costs a little over \$100.

With 30 percent of teenage mothers in the Flathead having a second baby before their first one reaches the age of two, Christofferson said she was intrigued by an idea that has proven to be successful in reducing the chance of a second pregnancy.

"This has worked," she said, and she feels strongly about doing something to prevent repeat pregnancies.

The program will pay mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 one dollar each day for a year as long as they attend weekly support group meetings and do not become pregnant again.

She said that while some critics are concerned that support programs are enabling young women to become mothers, young women continue to get pregnant, and this often has nothing to do with sex education or the availability of contraceptives and everything to do with unmet needs.

"It is a very complex community issue," she said and through the program they will work to create stronger families, so young women have goals and direction rather than just looking for someone to love. Christofferson said that most often the young women are not involved in a relationship when they become pregnant and the fathers, often unnamed, are not their peers, but men at

ture. So far the program itself has limited funding.

The Winter Classic Foundation of Whitefish has provided enough money to enroll 12 girls for six months, and Christofferson said it is their hope to generate adequate private money to continue the program for a year to determine its success rate locally. While the program has met with some sharp criticism, Christofferson said that the idea has more supporters than detractors.

The Nurturing Center is a non-profit organization that already affords teenage mothers the opportunity to finish high school. The Nurtury is a child care facility located next to the center that provides low cost care to children while their mothers are in class. Christofferson said since the Nurtury opened two and a half years ago it has broadened its case load to include other families at risk and enrolls regular families to provide positive role models. The volunteers watch children from birth to age three, and Christofferson said that the average daily attendance is 20 children.

She said there are some who view this kind of support as approval.

"Adolescent pregnancy is not okay with me," she said, and her stand on the issue of teen pregnancy is non-

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