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*****New SP-PAN program works for teenagers

DALLAS---When a young teenager becomes pregnant, she usually opens up a Pandora's box of problems for herself. She is not prepared to financially support herself, she doesn't know how to care for an infant and her body has not matured enough for safe childbearing, a condition that leads to a high health and disability rate for both mothers and their babies. If she has already had a child, these problems are multiplied.

That's why a group of local volunteers are working with The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, the Women's Council, the Mental Health Association and several other organizations in a collaborative effort to help teenage mothers.

"It's tough enough trying to grow up with the added responsibility of parenthood. That's what SP-PAN is all about," says Lou Anne Smith, director of the SP-PAN Volunteer Project. (SP-PAN stands for Serving Pregnant-Parenting Adolescent Needs.)

SP-PAN is a Maternal Health and Family Planning education and support pilot project aimed at young mothers-to-be in the school's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. There, pregnant teenagers who are already coming to the clinic for prenatal care have the opportunity of attending classes that cover understanding the reproductive system, how to take care of themselves during pregnancy, what happens during labor and delivery, contraception, parenting and early child-care skills. Fifty percent of the patients are high school drop-outs, and 65 of the 298 who have completed the classes so far have less than a ninth-grade education.

Although reliable national statistics on teenage pregnancy rates are hard to find, it has been determined that this figure in Dallas is one and a half times the national average, says Dr. Steve Heartwell, director of Family Planning and associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology.

"Moreover, we do know that in 1984, 5,398 births to teenagers 18 and younger were reported in Dallas County. And of this number, 28 percent were second, third, fourth--even fifth--pregnancies," says Heartwell. "It's pretty evident that something needs to be done here to help break the cycle of children-having-children."

Heartwell says that while several other major cities have educational programs for young pregnant teenagers, he believes that the Dallas program is unique in its early intervention. When a pregnancy is confirmed at the clinic and the first appointment for prenatal care is set, the teenager is invited to sign up for the free classes. When the young mother-to-be appears for her first medical visit, she may be invited at that time.

Another route is through the county hospital. When a teenager has had a baby in Parkland Memorial Hospital, she is assigned to a Family Planning clinic for her postpartum care and a first babycheck, if she is not already enrolled. If she chooses the Maple Avenue clinic, she may sign up for the classes there. (A second educational program is expected to begin in November at the Lancaster-Kiest clinic.)

The Dallas Women's Council so far has funded the program for \$144,000 over a three-year period. In addition, council members worked with Family Planning, the UTHSCD Pediatrics Department, the Red Cross, hospital personnel and Mental Health Association administrators in developing the curriculum. The project, which also receives funds from the Junior League and the Muscular Dystrophy Association, has been in operation a little more than a year. A total of 285 participants have taken the 17-lesson course.

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The SP-PAN classes, which are held three days a week for 45-minute sessions, generally have anywhere from six to 10 participants, and the course is designed so that some parts are repeated several times. This enables the participants several exposures to important information as well as working to ensure that if they're absent, they don't miss vital material. In addition to the young teenagers, other prenatal patients have requested attending classes, and they are always welcome. Mothers who complete the curriculum are rewarded with Red Cross certification and a 15-piece layette.

Volunteers are the key to success of the program, say the administrators. In fact, many of the 40 SP-PAN volunteers are members of the sponsoring Women's Council. Others include health science center and hospital personnel, other health workers, former school teachers and an assortment of civic workers. Some serve as teachers for the classes while others are members of the training staff that "teaches the teachers" the SP-PAN curriculum. One group of Parkland staffers made up of nurses and social workers keeps alert for young mothers in the hospital who seem to be in need of a special friend who can give them extra support. These young women are candidates for the advocacy arm of the program.

One of the teachers, Becky Downs of Carrollton, is a nurse-anesthetist. Becky explains that she wants to help women who are having their babies "under the worst circumstances." Nancy Nolly, who has worked on several Women's Center projects, says "I'll always want to help people." Trained as a social worker, Nolly now works in another field, but the SP-PAN project gives her an opportunity for staying involved in "helping" in her community.

Another volunteer, Sharon King of Dallas, says that a key role she is playing as an advocacy volunteer is that of an active, empathetic listener. "A teenager trapped in too early a pregnancy often has no one to turn to for even ordinary problems she may encounter," she says.

The advocacy volunteers receive special training to work with Family Planning patients who have difficult problems that need individual attention. King, for example, is working with Patricia, a young mother who has no job skills. Because she has no money, she is dependent on her boyfriend. King is helping her look for an educational program that will help her become self-supporting.

There are frustrations, King admits, but good things too. "Once when I had to confront Patricia about failure to meet commitments, I received a thank-you note from her," King says. "She said she wanted me to be proud of her, and that she wouldn't let me down again. It's that feeling of really helping a young woman--now a parent--grow and mature that keeps you going."

Another patient who needed help is Lisa, who is originally from Viet Nam. Lisa speaks English well enough that she was able to complete a beautician's course in another state. However, the complications of transferring her licence to Texas were beyond her. Lisa's volunteer was able to help her find her way through the maze of red tape.

Administrators say they're pleased at the project's success so far.

"All the young mothers are eager and open in the classes, and they keep coming back, week after week," says Smith. "I believe the SP-PAN project is making a real difference in their lives."

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