

Sexuality education spurs decline in teen pregnancy



by Al McFarlane and B.P. Ford, The Editors

Last Updated: 6/6/2007 11:54:05 AM

Lorrie Albachure, Bridget Riley, Pam White and Al McFarlane at Midtown Global Market Public Policy Forum broadcast Photo: Suluki Fardan

Pam White is the Director of Community Health Outreach at Northpoint Healthcare Center in North Minneapolis. One division she oversees is Northpoint's National Community Center of Excellence in Women's Health. As a whole, she said, "Northpoint is providing a wide range of services for the life spectrum for people living in the community. We have mental health services, medical services, dental and human services. We have one of the largest food shelves."

"We actually remodeled our building to provide more dental services and to serve more patients in our medical clinic as well," she said in a recent interview conducted at the Midtown Global Market KFAI FM90.3 live broadcast of the Conversations with Al McFarlane Public Policy Forum.

White said that Northpoint's women's health initiative is about six years old. "We've had that designation for the last six years. We provide services to women and girls age thirteen through the end of life. We've done a lot of outreach and education for a lot of women's health-related topics. We're in the process of developing more clinical services that we will be providing to women and girls including family planning services, heart-related health services," White said.

Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting (MOAPPP) is a Minnesota based non-profit organization working to prevent teen pregnancy and to support teens. Bridget Riley is the executive director of MOAPPP and Lorrie Albachure is MOAPPP's policy director. The organization produced the 2007 Minnesota State Adolescent Sexual Health Report.

"Our state adolescent sexual health report is something we put out each year to give the state a sense of what's happening in adolescent sexual health," said Riley in the broadcast interview. "So we talk in this report about pregnancy rates, birth rates as well as how many young people are having sex and what the STD rates are. The teen pregnancy rates are a challenge for us here in Minnesota. They've actually fallen a great deal over the last couple of decades, but I don't think people realize that. Overall, the rates have fallen over 27%, and in the African American community they've fallen over 50% since 1990."

However, Riley said that "sexually transmitted infections rates are actually rising, and there's been a record number of diagnoses made in the last year in the city and across the state, particularly of Chlamydia. I think that there are a couple of things happening: There are fewer young people engaging in sexual intercourse, so the rates of those who are have gone down as well. And for those who are, they've gotten better at using birth control, contraceptives."

Riley said that MOAPPP's mission is to develop and strengthen policies and programs that

support adolescent sexual health; that prevent adolescent pregnancy and support families. "We're really all about the young person and their sexual health. We provide resources and training for the people who are on the front lines. We've worked with Pam and with Northpoint a number of times. They've engaged with us in our trainings," she added. From the public policy level, said Lorrie Albachure, MOAPPP works on making sure that public policies are evidence-based. "Sex education in schools should include a message of abstinence, but also include information on contraception and disease prevention. They need to be age appropriate, and they need to be medically accurate and they need to occur continually throughout the educational process. So our organization, along with the Minnesota AIDS project, has been working through the Sex Ed for Life Coalition for the last eight years, trying to pass that legislation here in Minnesota."

Cultural differences can play a very big role in what people are comfortable talking about, Albachure added. Often parents don't know what happens in their public school system regarding sex education, so they may feel that the school is threatening their role with their child. "We think it's very good for parents to talk to their schools about what they're teaching. We know that parents play the very primary role of establishing the values of what kids believe in and what they use to make their choices about their life, but the schools are a very important part of ensuring that accurate information can get to them."

"Often, though, schools and other organizations hear just from the opposition," Albachure commented. "People who are supportive assume the right things are happening and so they are often quiet. We really have to work to organize grass roots support on a local and state level both with legislatures and with schools to make that our message is really heard, that parents do support that their kids get good information in school."

"While the parents and adults are arguing," Riley added, "the kids are still getting pregnant. I think it's very important that there's a role here for just very concrete information that young people are not necessarily getting. Parents may think they are getting it either from their church or from their school, and that's not necessarily true."

Last Updated: 6/6/2007 11:54:05 AM

Young people cite parents as their primary educators, but they also receive information from school and from their peers, Riley said. "Now as you recall some of the things that you may have heard when you were about fifteen, about how you can or can't get pregnant, you might remember that those weren't necessarily true. So that information piece is just so critical. Young people need that."

"We've also been very successful in using what we call the peer education program," Pam White added. "We've been at North High for well over ten years and we have trained youth to train their peers around pregnancy prevention and about STIs and HIV."

If young people are a source for information, why not give them the right information? If kids are going to rely on kids, why not be intentional and make sure that they have good information and the best practices, White said.

"I think that a lot of clinics are actually moving to that. A lot of youth are really being

encouraged to have the right information and also disseminate that information. And we're trying to move out of North High and actually move into the community, providing more peer education, and this summer we will be focused on having the youth come on site, provide education, and do peer education, clinics where they actually educate their peers. We wanted to be creative in doing that so we're working with the North High Girls in Action program to help us decide how to deliver that information. Is it that we have them come into the clinic? Should we be doing text messaging?"

Northpoint succeeds in delivering services across cultural lines. Its clientele is Hmong, Somali and East African, Hispanic, as well as non-immigrant neighborhood residents. "We try to use lay health care professionals called Community Health Workers, because they work with the cultures that they come from. So they know some of the cultural beliefs and some of the barriers to accessing that information and care," White said.

From a policy point of view, Albachure said, there has been great support for sex education in both the Minnesota House and Senate. "Our coalition has worked to pass legislation for eight years, and so it's not without its controversy and not without its barriers. One of the biggest barriers to passing this legislation is getting more legislators to know and understand that the public supports this as good public policy and as a good public health initiative that is backed by good information. We know that young people who get comprehensive sexuality education are more likely to use contraceptives, more likely to prevent STIs, to have fewer partners, to delay having sex. And it's a really uncomfortable topic in the legislature because you think that the average day is spent talking about taxes and air pollution and how do we make sure that we have renewable energy and resources. Often times we really get a silent response when we start talking about sex."

Riley added, "School districts choose what kinds of sex ed they're going to have and every district makes that decision based on the state statute, but then it gets down to the school building. We've got such an emphasis here, an important emphasis on local control, that every district teaches it differently, every school teaches it differently, and every classroom, whoever is in charge of that classroom, teaches things a little bit differently. So I think that's a challenge in terms of policy as well."

The MOAPPP report says that girls who have experienced childhood sexual abuse are at greater risk for early sexual involvement and also for unintended pregnancy. The estimates about one in four girls and one in six boys reporting experience of some kind of sexual violence before the age of eighteen.

The report said that teen girls very often put off finding out if they're pregnant and wait a long time before coming into the clinics for prenatal care. As a result, there can be a number of medical problems. Teenage moms are far more likely to have a variety of medical problems during their pregnancy and the low birth-weight babies are at a much higher rate with teen mothers.

"I think it's really critical that our young people get information and have an opportunity to gain some skills around sexual health," Riley observed. "They also need to have access to family planning services and sexual health services like they do at Northpoint. They need to know that

those services can be confidential, if they need them to be, and that it is very important that they access those types of services if they are going to be sexually active. The most important thing is that young people need a reason to not get pregnant, and that we've got to offer them hope as the adults. When we talk about teen pregnancy we almost always talk about the bad things and the terrible outcomes. And yet young people are wonderful and they're doing fabulous things, and if we can offer them a path that is different from that, they are so happy to take that path. And for those that do become parents, it's very critical that we make sure they get the wrap around support."