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Baby steps Lowell initiative offers support and guidance to teenage parents

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | November 15, 2007

LOWELL - This is not the way they wanted to start their lives together.

Still, Brian, 17, and Leslie, 16, both of Lowell, are now the parents of a 4-month-old infant named Jordan. Brian says "without a doubt" he loves his son. Every time the baby cries, he says, he gets worried and wonders if little Jordan is getting sick.

The cries keep him up at night. But so do questions about whether he will make a good father: Will he be able to support Jordan and Leslie? Is he up to being a responsible adult? What does the future hold for the family, whose oldest member is still too young to vote?

"I just want to be someone he can look up to," said Brian, who along with Leslie recently agreed to be interviewed if their surnames were not used in this story. "He's great. He's wonderful. I hope he feels the same way about me" one day.

Said Leslie, "I just want to give him the things I never had."

But with little education and no job skills, the teenagers face a difficult road as they try to turn their luck around. They are hoping a new program in Lowell, the Teen Pregnancy Prevention and Support Initiative, can help.

The program is run out of the Robert F. Kennedy Children Action Corps' Eliot Center, a state facility that deals with youngsters in trouble with the law. In just three months, the initiative has attracted 18 teenagers who need help with matters such as creating resumes, tips on interviewing with a prospective employer, and boosting self-confidence. And not only are the participants told about what it means to be responsible adults, they are also put through workshops that teach them how to be good parents - training that most of the teens have never had.

The program has proved to be popular and has a list of 20 youths waiting to join, said program founder Angie Spears, a community monitor at the Eliot Center.

She said the initiative is crucial in a city like Lowell. According to a state Department of Public Health report released this year, Lowell was one of the few cities in the Commonwealth to see an increase in its teen pregnancy rate in 2005, the latest year for which data are available. Lowell's rate in 2005 was 5.14 percent, compared with 4.89 percent in 2004.

Meanwhile, cities such as Boston, Methuen, and Lawrence saw drops in their teen pregnancy rates, the report said.

Because of its high rate, which is more than double the state's 2.17 percent, Lowell has at least 19 programs dealing with teen pregnancy. The Lowell Community Health Center Teen Coalition, for example, has a program focused on reducing behavior that can lead to teen pregnancy, HIV/STD infection, substance abuse, and violence.

The initiative offered at the Eliot Center, though, is unique in that it caters to teens who are homeless or

have had no adult supervision.

It's unclear why more teens are getting pregnant in Lowell at a time when teen pregnancy rates have dropped across the country. Spears said she thinks it's because the city lacks support systems for at-risk teens.

She said she formed the idea for her program after an early-morning phone call several months ago. She was asleep, she said, when one of the girls she was helping rang her just past midnight; the teen was pregnant, had no place to go, and was walking the streets of Lowell alone.

Spears said she picked up the girl to take her to a nearby shelter. But there were six sex offenders at the facility, she said, so she made a few more phone calls - to find the teen really had no place to go. If a pregnant teen or teen mother did not live with an adult, she wasn't qualified for state aid; that teen probably also lacked the skills to land a good-paying job, Spears said.

"That's when I realized I had to do something," she said. "We were having a group of teens who were falling through the cracks because of government bureaucracy."

Soon after, Spears received a small grant at the Eliot Center to create the Teen Pregnancy Prevention and Support Initiative, specifically aimed at helping teen parents and expecting teen parents. She said she has kept it going even though it has meant extra hours of work and no extra pay.

Though the classes target pregnant or at-risk girls, they have also attracted a number of boys who know they don't want to become fathers. The program introduces the boys to pregnancy prevention methods and walks them through the challenges of being a young parent, said Spears. Some of the boys also come in to hear talks on how to obtain a decent job, she said.

During a recent workshop, Brian and Leslie listened to tips on how to appear confident for job interviews. Jordan sat quietly in Leslie's arms while she and Brian heard specialists talk about proper attire and about the importance of communication.

"This is really helpful," said Leslie, a high school dropout now working to finish her GED.

Also sitting in the workshop was Omayra, 18, with her infant son, Malachi. Not only was she interested in getting a job, Omayra said, she also wanted to find housing. She and the baby were staying at a shelter in Medway.

"I want to get out of there," said Omayra, who also asked that her surname not be published. "I also need to work. I just put in an application with Wendy's, so we'll see."

Brian said he, too, wants to find work. Every morning, he has showed up at the Eliot Center to go on interviews.

But so far, nothing.

"I'll keep trying," he said.

Spears said she intends to continue the program as long as she can. But she concedes it may have to end soon for lack of funds. She said she needs around \$40,000 to keep it going for two more years.

"Until then," she said, "we'll do what we can."

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