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The high social costs of teen parenting

By State Sen. Richard R. Tisei

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High school is hard enough for most teenagers, as they juggle the competing demands of homework, friends and, in many cases, a part-time job. Now imagine how much harder it is to be going to high school and trying to raise a child at the same time.

This is the predicament facing thousands of young girls in

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Massachusetts today. According to a recent study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, titled "By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing," teenage mothers face an uncertain future, as they are more likely to drop out of school and live in poverty.

Unfortunately, this trend often carries over to the next generation. The study found that the children of teen mothers are more likely to grow up poor, to be abused or neglected, and to be dependent on welfare. Many teen mothers give birth to daughters who become pregnant themselves as teenagers, while their sons are more likely to be incarcerated.

I recently had an opportunity to meet with several young mothers from my district when they visited my State House office for Teen Parent Lobby Day, sponsored by the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy. Each girl had a story to tell about the struggles they have faced taking care of their baby, the difficulty of finding childcare, and their desire to further their education so they can provide their child with a better life.

These young mothers face an uphill battle, but fortunately there are programs available to help them. One of these programs is Healthy Families Massachusetts, which services first-time parents age 20 and younger, from pregnancy through the child's third birthday. The program offers home visits and other support services, including prenatal and parenting education, as well as family-focused groups and activities. Locally, the program is based at Hallmark Health and services the communities of Everett, Malden, Melrose, Medford, North Reading, Reading, Stoneham and Wakefield.

Healthy Families wants to help young parents defy the odds and the sobering statistics associated with teen pregnancy. While they are at high risk for abusing their children, 88 percent of the participants in Healthy Families have not fallen into this trap, and in the past eight years, just 2 percent of those enrolled through Hallmark Health have had a 51-A report supported by DSS. In fact, almost 99 percent of the children in the program are healthy and test at or above the developmental level for their age group.

Although teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school after becoming pregnant, 83 percent of Healthy Families participants are either continuing their education or have graduated from school, compared to just 53 percent nationally. Within the past six years, 65 participants in the Hallmark Health program have earned their GED or graduated from high school, college or a certificate program, many with honors.

One young mother I spoke with, already has her GED, and is now attending Bunker Hill Community College part-time as she pursues a degree in nursing. She is fortunate to have a built-in support network of family members who can care for her son while she attends classes on the weekend.

Others are not as fortunate. They want to go to school, but can't always rely on or even afford a babysitter. The waiting list for childcare is often months or years, and participants are required to be registered for school before they can receive these services, which put them in a hopeless Catch-22 situation.

According to By the Numbers, teen pregnancies cost taxpayers a staggering \$9.1 billion a year. In Massachusetts, the average annual cost for a child born to a mother who is 17 or younger is \$6,001. The total annual cost associated with teen childbearing in the state is conservatively estimated at more than \$100 million, which includes \$37 million for public health care; \$65 million for child welfare; \$29 million for incarceration; and \$34 million in lost tax revenue, due to decreased earnings and spending.

The report notes that, between 1991 and 2004, there were more than 80,700 teen births in Massachusetts, costing taxpayers \$2.2 billion. However, the good news is that, over this same time period, the state's teen birth rate actually declined by 41 percent, leading to an estimated savings of \$144 million in 2004 alone.

This raises an important point: although it is incumbent on the state to provide services to teen mothers so their children can grow up healthy, it is imperative that the state invest in programs that will actually prevent future teen pregnancies.

Healthy Families recognizes this, and has succeeded in reducing the number of second pregnancies among young parents receiving services through the program. In the past eight years, only 1 percent of Healthy Families participants have had a second baby, compared to 16.6 percent statewide and 35 percent of teen parents nationwide.

The Teen Parent Program at Malden High School, which is run by Director Diana Makhlof, is another outstanding resource. The program provides in-house childcare to young mothers while they attend school, and services not only teenage students who are pregnant, but also those who have already given birth, with a focus on keeping these young mothers in school and preventing them from dropping out.

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The girls I spoke to from this program, are committed to taking parenting education classes and finishing school, but are frustrated that some girls their age still think it would be "cool" to have a baby, despite the struggles and hardships that entails. They told me many of their peers don't realize the important responsibilities that come with motherhood, and instead think of a baby as nothing more than an "accessory", like a handbag or a piece of jewelry. They also told me they wish there were more programs that focused on pregnancy prevention, and that more students had access to comprehensive health education, which is an idea I am supporting through legislation.

Although the number of teenage births continues to decline, the worst thing we can do is to become complacent and think the problem has been solved. I believe the Legislature needs to heed the warnings found in the recent study: unless we actively promote and fund prevention efforts and programs that really work, we will be forced to deal with the many negative social consequences associated with teen pregnancy for generations to come.

Sen. Richard R. Tisei, R-Wakefield, represents Malden, Melrose, Reading, Stoneham and Wakefield.

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