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# Nurturing young mothers

## High pregnancy rate of foster teenagers shows growing needs

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Advertisement

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### *CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS.*

*A story in Thursday's Metro section incorrectly identified Mark Courtney as director of the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children. After five years as director, Courtney became a faculty associate on Sept. 1. The new director is Matthew Stagner. This story contains corrected material, published Sept. 23, 2006.*

Jakeyla Reed is trying to be a better mother than the one she had--her GED diploma on the wall and the picture of her laughing infant son are mementos of her push for a happier, fuller life.

Still, having 1-year-old son Anthony places Reed, 19, among the nearly 800 state wards who are pregnant or parenting.

A University of Chicago study released Wednesday found that girls in foster care are 2.5 times more likely than their peers to become pregnant before age 19.

By the time they reach Reed's age, almost half of teen wards who got pregnant have a second pregnancy.

While national teen-pregnancy prevention efforts have been under way for decades, experts say the U. of C. findings--from a survey of 732 youths in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin--highlight a group of particularly vulnerable girls.

Experts say the data expose a need for collaboration between child-welfare and pregnancy-prevention advocates that goes beyond basic sex information. The girls, they say, must be motivated to plan for their futures.

"I'm surprised at how high the rates were," said Mark Courtney, the study's author and former director of the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children (this sentence as

published has been corrected in this text). "It is a call to action for the system to take family-planning education very seriously."

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has plans to create regional networks of programs that would improve services statewide for pregnant and parenting teens in foster care.

"We have a commitment to this population, and this report will certainly inform changes we make going forward," said DCFS spokesman Kendall Marlowe.

Marlowe pointed to a DCFS procedure that requires that youths old enough to have children be told of family planning services. That procedure does not go into detail, however, about what that information should include or who should provide it.

While training on sex education is offered to foster parents, it is not required, Marlowe said.

"There is an internal workgroup that has recently begun to meet on this issue to review our approach," he added.

Cook County Public Guardian Robert Harris said teen pregnancy in foster care is a problem, and sex education to foster youths is informal and inconsistent.

"Some workers will talk to kids about birth control all of the time. Others don't," Harris said.

National teen-pregnancy experts expressed disappointment that child-welfare officials were not keeping a closer eye on state wards who could become pregnant, many of whom are victims of abuse or neglect.

Carol Hogue, Emory University professor of maternal and child health, suggested the overseers may need their own education.

"Each child has a caseworker, and the system itself should be designed to identify ways of approaching this question either through training the caseworker or offering workshops," Hogue said. "It has to be something intentional for which people responsible are accountable."

Other experts said the lack of stable family and community presents an obstacle that education cannot always overcome.

"Young people are in a system because they are missing those connections," said Debra Hauser, executive vice president for Advocates for Youth, a national non-profit that educates youths about sex. "It makes them very, very vulnerable to looking for connections elsewhere."

Jacquelyn Williams, New Mexico State University assistant professor of nursing, said the key is to get foster children focused on the future.

"What would change their behaviors? Planning their lives," she said.

In the study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and Chicago's Uhlich Children's Advantage Network, teens told researchers that a baby was someone they could love, and pregnancy was a chance to prove they could be better parents than their own.

Kristen Tertzakian, senior manager of state and local outreach at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said her group was encouraging teen-pregnancy groups to partner with child-welfare agencies to target this particular problem.

On Chicago's South Side, state wards who are teen mothers take refuge in a transitional living program run by Uhlich Children's Advantage Network. In these brick buildings, a housemother supervises girls and their children who live in apartments.

Interviews with two 19-year-old girls who came into DCFS care after their mothers, who were addicted to drugs, abandoned them helps to explain some possible reasons for foster youth pregnancy.

Jakeyla Reed, 19, is studying criminal justice at Daley College and works the overnight shift as a dairy clerk at a local supermarket.

Reed's grandmother raised her.

"It was a relief to live with her," Reed said, recalling times that her mother left her home alone with nothing to eat.

After Reed's grandmother died, she moved into a DCFS-funded apartment to begin raising her son.

As a teen, Reed fell in love with a young man she dated more than two years. She said they planned on having a child together and were not using contraception.

When she found out she was pregnant, Reed said she was happy for "the opportunity to take care of somebody that needs you, that loves you."

"I just want to be everything I didn't have in my own mother," she said. "When I look at him I feel like I did a good job. I finally felt completed when he was born."

She reads to her son, tickles him, braids his hair. They dance. Reed said her mother is also becoming a good grandmother.

"She's trying to make up for what she did, with him," she said.

leisha Cowley, 19, a state ward and freshman at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, has a 1-year-old son, l'monte Crump.

"My mom ended up leaving us in the park by ourselves," Cowley said. "She had said she would be right back. She ended up not coming back."

Cowley lived with relatives for several years until she got pregnant at age 17. She kicked her marijuana addiction so no one could take away her baby and moved into DCFS-funded apartment.

"I was thinking God sends kids to this earth on purpose," Cowley said. "I wasn't trying to have no baby. It was a surprise to me, and I just accepted the fact that I was going to be a young mother. And I was going to change my life for better."

Cowley recalled looking into the audience from the stage during her high school graduation and seeing her son, laughing.

"This is for my son," she told herself. "This is for my son."

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