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Teen Births High in WMass

By Sandra E. Constantine

Massachusetts has one of the lowest teenage pregnancy rates in the country, but the rate among Latinas in the western part of the state is high and growing, an expert said yesterday. Patricia Quinn, executive director of the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, said 48 percent of teen births in Springfield in 1996 were to Latinas; but that percentage rose to 65 percent by 2006.

Quinn spoke to about 100 people yesterday at a Baystate Medical Center Conference Center gathering sponsored by the Youth Empowerment Adolescent Health Network. The group is working with teen-agers in Hampden County to improve adolescent reproductive health, with a focus on teenage pregnancy. "We have to take a more proactive approach," said Dr. Sarah P. Perez-McAdoo, co-founder of the network and an obstetrician-gynecologist at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield.

Latinas in Massachusetts have a rate of teenage pregnancy six times higher than that of non-Hispanics, Perez-McAdoo said. "Parents have not had the history of their parents talking to them about sex education," she said. Quinn said a third of Latino youths report never having had a helpful conversation with a parent about sex. The state Legislature needs to invest

more in the problem, she said, adding, "We are not in a good place with regard to that."

Quinn said the only proposal on the table to increase funding is closing corporate tax loopholes. She is working on a report on teen pregnancy in the state that will be released in May. What is needed is community support for sex education and for access to contraception for sexually active teens, Quinn said. Teenagers also need the perception of opportunity and hope for a bright future, she said.

Ruthie E. Flores, senior manager for the Latina initiative of the National Campaign on Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said 51 percent of Latina teenagers get pregnant at least once before they turn 20. "We see a lot of multiple births even before they turn 20 and lots of high school dropouts," Flores said.

Statistics released at the conference state that there were 55 more births to Springfield women ages 15 to 19 in 2006 than in the previous year. Of all the births in Springfield for that age group and year, 64.9 percent were to Hispanic mothers as opposed to 48.6 percent in 1996.

In Holyoke in 2006, the birth rate for women ages 15 to 19 was 94.8 per 1,000 women as opposed to the state rate of 21.3. For the same year and age group for Hispanics, births were 84.6 percent of the total teenage births.