

Georgia records some of biggest declines in teen birthrates

By Misty Williams

Georgia experienced one of the biggest declines in teen birthrates throughout the country in 2009, and advocates hope a new influx of federal dollars will spur continued progress.

From 2007 to 2009, Georgia ranked among the top 10 states to see significant dips in the birthrate for girls ages 15 to 17. The rate fell 15.4 percent to 23.6 births per 1,000 females ages 15-17 in 2009, according to a National Center for Health Statistics report released this week.

The birthrate for 18- to 19-year-olds also dropped 16.7 percent in Georgia during that period, to 83.9 births per 1,000 females in 2009.

It's a tremendous improvement, said Michele Ozumba, CEO of the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention. "We are seeing progress in the Southeast."

When G-CAPP was founded in 1995, Georgia had the highest teen birthrate in the country, Ozumba said, and, today, it has fallen to No. 13.

The decline mirrors a national trend.

The teen birthrate in the U.S. fell 8 percent from 2007 to 2009 -- marking a historic low of 39.1 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, which is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The drop in teen rates was part of an overall decline in rates for women under the age of 40 -- which may be a result, in part, of women putting off getting pregnant because of the recession, said Brady Hamilton, a statistician with the center.

Still, the dramatic decline "underscores truly remarkable progress on a very difficult social issue that many once considered intractable," said Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Except for a spike from 2005 to 2007, the nation has seen a steady decline in teen births since a peak in 1991, Albert

said. Better education on sexually transmitted diseases, more contraception options and parental involvement all played a role, he said, but there's still a long way to go.

Teen births cost taxpayers an estimated \$9.1 billion annually, he said. In Georgia, it costs taxpayers more than \$340 million -- including \$177 million in state and local costs -- each year, according to Albert's group. The costs, based on a 2006 report, include things such as public health care, child welfare, and lost tax revenue because of decreased earnings and spending.

"We're still four times higher than the next highest industrialized country, so we shouldn't cheer too loudly," said G-CAPP's Ozumba, who added there has been a recent infusion of federal dollars put toward the issue.

Last year, the CDC awarded G-CAPP \$7.5 million over five years for a program aimed at reducing pregnancy in Augusta-Richmond County, which has a teen birthrate 22.9 percent higher than the state average. The funds are part of a larger Obama administration initiative awarding \$100 million to support evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs across the country.

The Augusta program's goal, Ozumba said, is to reduce teen pregnancy and births 10 percent by 2015 -- which is projected to save the public \$1.2 million a year.

The Jane Fonda-founded nonprofit will work with a variety of agencies, after-school programs, clinics and other groups. Currently in the planning stage, the communitywide program will look to increase access to health services for sexually active teens, implement prevention programs and create connections between those programs and clinics, among other strategies.

Part of the challenge will be breaking down ideological barriers in a state that has traditionally focused on teaching abstinence before marriage only, Ozumba said. "We have to spend a lot of time trying to bring people around the table."