

TODAY'S localnews



Photo courtesy of Vista Community Clinic

Denisse Reyes, an employee with Choices teen clinic in Vista, started as an intern from Rancho Buena Vista High School. After working with the clinic, she has decided that she wants to become a pharmacist.

Life lessons

Cal-SAFE helps pregnant students and teen mothers stay in school

By Pat Sherman | pat.sherman@tlnews.net

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In a year when 17 girls at a Massachusetts high school gave birth because of an alleged pregnancy pact, and magazines increasingly spotlight the glow of expectant celebrity mothers, North County educators are striving to paint pregnancy as anything but a glamorous option for teens.

Interviews with teen pregnancy program coordinators in Escondido, San Marcos, Vista, Oceanside and Carlsbad reveal that at least 500 high school girls were pregnant or were already mothers during the 2007-08 school year.

That number includes only students who stayed in school and participated in

Choices teen clinics

WHAT Free and confidential sexual and reproductive health services for teens offered

Cal-SAFE (California School-Age Families Education), a state-funded program that helps teen mothers and fathers finish high school.

through Vista Community Clinic

The program provides teen parents with day care, bus passes, tutors, counseling, career guidance, coping skills, meal supplements and maternity education.

OCEANSIDE 517 N. Horne St.

“Even though it may take them a little bit longer and they may have to do their pathway a little bit different,” the goal is to keep them in school and help them graduate, said Karen Rizzi, an assistant superintendent with the Escondido Union High School District, where about 150 students were enrolled in Cal-SAFE last year, most of them teen mothers or pregnant girls.

VISTA 1000 Vale Terrace Drive

INFORMATION
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According to San Diego Community Health Improvement Partners, teen births cost California taxpayers at least \$1.4 billion annually.

Though the overall county birthrate for girls ages 15 to 19 decreased from 41.1 per 1,000 in 2005 to 34.7 per 1,000 in 2006 — the most recent year for which data is available — teen pregnancy rates don't seem to be declining in North County.

There were 138 students enrolled in Cal-SAFE in both Vista and San Marcos, 85 in Oceanside and 25 in Carlsbad.

In 1998, Vista and Oceanside were identified as “hot spots” for teen pregnancy by the California Wellness Foundation, creating a wave of awareness and funding that has since ceased, said Maria Elena Gutierrez, adolescent health services coordinator for Vista Community Clinic.

Gutierrez said she has seen teen births in North County decline when pregnancy prevention education is provided, then increase when it is taken away.

The money Vista Community Clinic was receiving for its prevention education work from the state and the California Wellness Foundation dried up in 2005.

“We had to limit the number of classes and the number of students we reach every year,” Gutierrez said. “We used to educate the parents ... in English as a Second Language classes and adult evening classes on talking to their teens about sex.”

Now that the funding has ceased, “we're seeing an increase in teen pregnancy,” Gutierrez said.

Since 1999, the Bush administration has more than doubled grants for abstinence-only education.

One health educator, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said abstinence-only approaches are preferred by North County school districts.

“That's been a problem,” the official said. “We can't put our head in the sand. We need to be teaching preventive (measures).”

Debbie Adams, site supervisor at Ocean Shores continuation high school in Oceanside, said seeing her Cal-SAFE students cope with their lives is good prevention education for other students.

“Some of these students have part-time jobs,” Adams said. “They're up at night trying to do homework, trying to take care of that child that's sick, that's cutting teeth. They let other students know that it is not a walk in the park to be a parent.

Though pregnancy is less common among girls of middle-school age, it still occurs, said Susie Bristow, teen

parent program director for the Vista Unified School District.

“Our youngest one was 12,” Bristow said with sadness and frustration in her voice.

Tammy Rai Snider, who works with Carlsbad High's Cal-SAFE program, said birth control was discussed in a teen parenting class, though that course was discontinued last year because of low enrollment and state budget cuts.

The topic might be broached this year in physical education classes, she said.

Across the nation, studies have shown that teen birth rates are higher among poorer segments of the population.

Janet Stoddard, a teacher and program director at Foothills High South, an alternative school in San Marcos, said some teen girls may see pregnancy as culturally appropriate.

“Their mother may have been married and having children when she was 15 or 16 ... so it's not out of the norm for them,” Stoddard said. “They're thinking that the end-all is getting married and having children, not even thinking about going on to college.

“A majority of parents, despite their ethnicity, are disappointed, because they want their child to complete their education. (We need to) get the word out to parents that just because they're pregnant doesn't mean they have to quit school.”

Stoddard said there is increased emphasis on persuading teen fathers to enroll in the Cal-SAFE program and complete their education.

Across North County, teen fathers tend to be about two to five years older than teen mothers, Cal-SAFE coordinators said.

Vista Unified is partnering with the Vista Community Clinic this year to provide extra counseling and support for teen dads, Bristow said.

Reach reporter Pat Sherman at (760) 752-6774.

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