

# Parents recruited for teen pregnancy fight

By SARAH KELLEY

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The Alexandria Campaign on Adolescent Pregnancy is launching a program that involves parents in the fight to curb teen pregnancy.

Through the Parent Peer Education Program, volunteers will teach parents how to talk to their children about sex and other adolescent issues.

The first four peer educators were trained Saturday by representatives from the D.C. Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy, which has operated such a program for about three years. During the training the volunteers learned how to host educational meetings in the community on their own.

"Now it's their responsibility to go out and solicit parents to train them how to talk to their kids about sex," said Patsieann Misiti, director of the Alexandria campaign, which is based in the city's Office on Women.

Each parent educator is expected to conduct between four and six outreach forums at local churches or recreation centers. The volunteers must recruit up to 15

parents to participate in each forum.

"If we reach 200 parents this time around it will be a success," Misiti said.

Program volunteers will rely on the assistance of mentors who have been trained through the Office on Women. Mentors will check in with the parent educators periodically and serve as a resource.

The parent peer educator program grew from focus groups with parents held in winter 2002. The focus groups, sponsored by the Alexandria Campaign on Adolescent Pregnancy, revealed a desire by parents to receive more information on how to talk to their children about topics including sex, abstinence, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

"Most parents said they didn't know how to talk to their kids about these issues," Misiti said. "This program is a response to their needs."

Sandra Talbert, who was trained as a parent peer educator Saturday, said that's why she became involved.

"I have a 16-year-old son and I had not talked to him about the subject," Talbert said. "I wanted to find out how and I wanted to help other parents learn to do the

same thing."

This is the first time representatives from the Washington campaign have helped another community launch a similar program, which is intended to empower parents and spark communication between parents and children, said Jennifer Bissell, director of parent peer education in Washington.

"We want our model to be used as much as possible because it's been so successful," Bissell said. "Teens want their parents to initiate conversations about sex. This program gives parents that push to do it."

The parent peer educators will begin hosting outreach meetings across Alexandria in the next few weeks.

While this is a good start for the program, Lisa Baker, director of the Alexandria Office on Women, said she expects it to grow.

Another parent peer educator training session will be held in the fall. Once the word spreads about the program, Baker said she hopes to attract more volunteers, including some who speak Spanish who could host workshops in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods.



Jeff Mankie/Journal

**Lisa Baker, right, director of the Office on Women for the city of Alexandria, discusses the new parent mentor program, which is modeled after one used in Washington, at a seminar Saturday with Jennifer Bissell, left, and Pamela Meade, of the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.**

The Office on Women provides parent peer educators with a \$50 stipend for every workshop they conduct.

For more information about the program, call (703) 838-5030.