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opinions/editorials

Roots to Rap

Rahiel Tesfamariam



Are You Asking the \$747 Million Dollar Question?

Every year in the District of Columbia almost one of every eight teenage girls becomes pregnant, making the teen pregnancy rate in the nation's capital higher than any state in the country, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. The number, which is enough to fill an entire high school, is a tremendous factor in many of our city's socio-economic problems.

As a result of this tremendous problem, "the District government spends a

minimum of \$747 million each year in direct costs associated with teen pregnancy. Nearly half of the combined budgets of the Department of Health and the Department of Human Services in the District are directed to assistance programs for families begun by teens. Yet the District invests only \$6 million in prevention programs: less than one penny of prevention for every dollar of cost."

D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to cut the District of Columbia teen pregnancy rate in half by employing youth devel-

opment principles, believes that there is a cost benefit to investing in teen pregnancy prevention as it can help reduce welfare dependency, child poverty, poor health, inadequate education and a host of other problems. One of the ways in which the organization recommends doing that is by "increasing the current levels of District government investment in prevention from \$6 million a year to \$74 million a year: from a penny a dollar to a dime per dollar."

One tactic that the D.C. Campaign has used since its early days that has proven to be worthwhile is bringing faith based institutions and the secular

community together in preventing teen pregnancy in the District.

More than 100 organizations were invited to the Church of the Epiphany in Northwest on April 28th for a roundtable discussion seeking to accomplish this very goal.

Brenda Rhodes Miller, the organization's founding executive director, explained in an interview that "this roundtable is about partnerships; this isn't about a particular approach to preventing teen pregnancy. There are only two ways to prevent pregnancy: if you don't have sex (often known as abstinence or waiting) or if you do have sex,

you use contraceptives carefully and consistently. But the real issue is what motivates young people to want to avoid pregnancy in the first place."

Seeking to "encourage people of good will to unite and work together for the betterment of young people, families and children wherever they find themselves," the discussion addressed issues such as the challenges faced in developing partnerships, the need for volunteers, and how to put teen pregnancy in the greater context of self and communal development.

"What you do doesn't have to define

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who you are, who you are defines what you do," Rev. Orlando Bego, a full-time youth outreach worker and youth pastor with Upper Room Baptist Church, said, stressing that youth don't have to be the product of their environment.

When 62% of youth 13-17 in the District have had sex, it becomes critical that you "understand the true character and culture of who you are dealing with" because "what works in Northwest may not work in Southeast and what works at Wilson High School may not work at Coolidge High School," Bego said. He added that the youth are watching the environment around them and accepting that as normality.

Rev. Mark Fair, senior director of faith-based initiatives of the Points of Life Foundation, said, "Trust those that are closest to the problem when you are advocating for a solution" and "tell stories to get people's attention."

D.C. Campaign representatives stressed findings based in youth devel-

opment research that says teen pregnancy is less likely when boys and girls #1- experience school success from an early age; #2- enjoy positive connections to their families, schools and neighborhoods; #3- have safe places to spend their time doing interesting things with adult supervision; #4- get comprehensive, teen friendly health care; #5- make a clear plan that does not include pregnancy; and #6- have clear sense of belonging.

For more information about the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, visit www.teenpregnancydc.org or call 202-789-4666. For Rahiel Tesfamariam send email to rahiel@washingtoninformer.com.