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In Emergency Services

EMS Sex Ed Program Reduces Rural Pregnancy Rate

By Barbara S. Greenstreet, M.A.

In one year at Trousdale County High School in rural Tennessee, 12 of the school's 350 students became mothers. The pregnancy rate was nine percent for 18- to 19-year-old students, and seven percent for 14- to 17-year-olds. The youngest pregnant student was only 12. With a population of 7,700, the smallest county in the state held another distinction: it had the highest teen pregnancy rate in Tennessee.

"Our Health Council decided this was a huge issue," said paramedic Randall Kirby, director of ambulance services for Trousdale Medical Center. "The health department educator was unable to offer a program, so EMS stepped up to the plate." After only two sex ed classes taught by paramedics, the number of teen pregnancies fell to four, and in 2003, fell again to only one.

The *Rural/Frontier EMS Agenda for the Future* advocates integrating EMS into community healthcare systems. The Trousdale County program, named Reality Check by students, exemplifies the benefit that EMS can have on community well-being.

"Our EMS is imbedded in our community," Kirby said. "We participate in many health fairs and functions in the area. Our paramedics use downtime for related services like flu shots, inspections and CPR education." Why not add sex ed to the list?

"The biggest hurdle is getting people to think outside the box about what EMS agencies can do," Kirby explained. "We need to get beyond just thinking, 'We make ambulance runs, that's what we do.'"

Shannon Mathis, one of two paramedics teaching the Reality Check program, said that she expected the community to balk at EMS teaching sex education in the public

schools, but to her surprise, community support came easily. "We had no resistance from the community," she said. "I was surprised, but we're a small county, and everyone could see the problem. People really wanted something to be done, so they welcomed us."

FUNDING CHALLENGES

Kirby identified three major challenges to EMS-based community healthcare programming:

- Increasing the scope (potential) of EMS;
- Funding; and
- Community support.

These three components are often inter-related, Kirby explained. "Reimbursement for EMS programs is always a challenge," he said. "For government-funded EMS, a tax levy may be needed to increase revenue. Here, we have a contract with the county, but either way, the burden is on taxpayers. If you don't have the public on your side, you'll get less funding."

Reality Check was initially funded with a \$23,000 grant from the Tennessee Department of Health, which purchased the robot babies (Baby Think It Over™ dolls from Reality Works Inc.), furnished supplies, and met start-up payroll. The Trousdale Medical Center Foundation also funded some related events and expenses. Ongoing costs are anticipated at about \$5,000 to \$6,000 annually, which Kirby said he hopes to fund with grants. "If the grants dry up, we will fund it from EMS as a community project," he said.

How It Works

Reality Check classes are taught by two paramedics. They teach on paid time, but

not on ambulance response duty, so emergency care availability is not impacted.

Classes are offered as a two-week segment within the high school's Home Economics department. Co-ed classes include students in 9th through 12th grades. Parental permission is required to participate; only one parent has declined so far. Instructors also have given presentations at the middle school, recognizing that this information is needed and appropriate at ages younger than high school.

Reality Check is a fact-based program that presents statistics and information on STDs, pregnancy, contraception, costs of raising a child, impact of early initiation of sexual activity, and emotional aspects of sexual relationships.

"We cover parenting, adoption, abortion, and touch on infant medical emergencies," Mathis said. "We leave lots of time for questions and answers, that's really the most important aspect of the class. We are very honest, even about our own experiences. The students know that we'll be straightforward and honest with them, so they are honest and open with us too."

Instructors are outgoing, lively personalities; in this case, two young women who had the ability to develop rapport and relate to teens. Kirby selected them to teach the program because he believed that "teens would pay attention and listen to them. They are very intelligent, very open to the kids."

Students each take home a robot baby for at least one overnight or weekend. The Reality Works Inc. Web site (www.reality-works.com) offers "Real Care Baby" (the current model) dolls with supplies for about \$350 to \$450 each (depending on the package and number purchased). The com-

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puterized dolls can be programmed to cry for care and feeding on realistic schedules. They also generate data for instructors of how quickly and how often responses are made by the "parents." In response to student request, Trousdale Reality Check staff wrote and received a grant to purchase 22 additional dolls, to allow more hands-on experience.

Response to the program has been so positive that the instructors offered a presentation on Reality Check at the Rural Health Association Conference where they had the highest attendance of any break-out session, received excellent participant evaluations, and they gave away 50 CDs with the curriculum and PowerPoint presentation on how to do the program.

"Everyone seems to want to make a big deal out of this little program we just kind of put together," Mathis said. Big deal or not, Reality Check gets results, and that's what matters.

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