

## My View column: Pregnancy crisis brings opportunity for city

By Lianne Cook  
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Another day, another news report focusing on Gloucester.

It may increasingly seem that the "sky is falling" in Gloucester because of the elevated number of teen pregnancies at the high school, but the attention to this issue has triggered widespread concern that we at Health Quarters believe can lead to a positive, effective approach to this problem.

We applaud Mayor Carolyn Kirk's proposal to organize a group of independent experts who would advise the School Committee on policies and services that address teen pregnancy prevention, which include plans for comprehensive sexuality education and evaluating the provision of birth control at the high school health center. It is a great start to a process that we hope will ultimately include parents, school personnel, community members, and students themselves. We are all partners working toward the same goal: to preserve the health and well being of our young people.

Prior to the decision-making process, Health Quarters would like to share some truths and insights gleaned over our 37-year history of providing state- and federally-funded reproductive health services to women, men, and teens:

### **1. Prevention works, and it takes a multidimensional, community-based, sustained effort.**

One major factor key to teen pregnancy prevention is a science- and evidence-based, comprehensive sexuality education program. While abstinence is the primary message in a good sex ed curriculum, schools that offer abstinence-only-until-marriage or few or no sex ed classes are not addressing the needs of the more than half of high school students who are sexually active. And prevention programs that connect teens to their future, such as the state-funded Teen Outreach Program we administer in Salem (which combines life skills and community service-learning to support positive youth development and prevent

early pregnancy), could provide alternatives and direction to young women who may become pregnant intentionally.

## **2. Access to contraception is largely responsible for the decline in teen pregnancy over the past 15 years.**

When care, including birth control, is affordable, easy to acquire, and accompanied by counseling by a health professional, the chance of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease is greatly reduced. Of course, encouraging abstinence goes hand in hand with encouraging effective contraception use. Just as a school health center provider follows up with students when they are using birth control, he or she will also stay connected with students who are abstinent to make sure that continues to be the case and, if not, to meet their birth control needs. Any teen pregnancy prevention initiative will have the best chance of success when availability of birth control, along with abstinence, is part of the plan.

## **3. Confidentiality is concern No. 1 for teens seeking care for sensitive matters such as sexuality.**

According to the Society for Adolescent Medicine, "confidentiality is consistent with (teens') development of maturity and autonomy, and without it, some adolescents will forgo care." Confidentiality is especially important on Cape Ann. Twice Health Quarters established a clinic at or near Addison Gilbert Hospital, and twice it was underutilized because clients' concerns about being recognized outweighed the convenience of the service. That said, one of the core values of comprehensive counseling and family planning services in a school health center should be parental involvement. Providers can help students see how parental involvement in their health care decisions is beneficial. But, in the end, we have seen that meeting teens "where they are" rather than risk them turning away from care is so vital in preventing pregnancy and disease.

Health Quarters cares deeply about the sexual health of teens in Gloucester and stands ready to collaborate on the following: To make our experience and expertise available as a resource in formulating an effective pregnancy prevention plan at the school health center; to help choose and, or deliver a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum at the high school; to help facilitate a parent and community forum on this topic; to collaborate with local health care providers; and to continue to make certain that Gloucester teens know that confidential, affordable care in Beverly is still just a short train ride away.

This unfortunate spike in teen pregnancy can be an opportunity for Gloucester: The beginning of a measured — and inclusive — process that will bring many groups together and will set a unified course for the future of a proud city.

*Lianne Cook is in her 19th year as executive director of Health Quarters, which has reproductive health centers in Beverly, Haverhill, Lawrence, and Reading.*

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