

Common Ground tries to help

Coping with teenage pregnancy

By BARBARA UNDERWOOD

Workers at Common Ground, Birmingham human resources agency, are thinking about how they could spend \$1.3 million.

They don't have the money to spend and question if they ever will, but Common Ground has applied for a \$1.3 million federal grant.

The money would be used to help prevent unplanned teenage pregnancies and provide alternatives, according to Joanne Lindensmith, supervisor of crisis services at the agency.

"The \$1.3 million over five years is the maximum possible but the grant could be a lot less," Ms. Lindensmith said. "And it will be 18 months before we know whether we will get anything."

"The whole world has applied for this grant, everybody wants this money," she added.

THE FOCUS of the grant is to provide comprehensive care all in one place — to treat those already pregnant and provide pre-natal care, education and related information for girls 17 and younger.

Ms. Lindensmith and others at Common Ground are excited about the grant because most other people "who are doing something about teenage pregnancies are all profit-making, such as abortion clinics," Ms. Lindensmith said.

Statistics on teenage pregnancies are "overwhelming," she added. At Common Ground alone, the numbers of young girls who have been seen for pregnancy tests and birth control information jumped from 10 girls under age 15 in all of 1976 to 25 girls in the same age group in the first four months of 1979, according to Jean Lee, director of the agency's medical clinic. About one half of the girls were from Birmingham, she said.

"And those are just the ones we see. I wonder how many of them fudge on their age and say they are 13 or 14 when they really are 12 years old."

A LARGE number of 12-year-olds are promiscuous," Ms. Lindensmith said. "I am not implying that it is rampant. I am not talking about what every kid is doing, just some of them. But aren't some as valuable as the whole?"

"Kids do need to know about this and there is no place to learn," she added. "It is really important that all adolescents have a base of information to help them decide what to do."

"Most young girls are being taught what birth control information they have by their boy friends and they have a vested interest in it," Ms. Lindensmith said. "And not all adults have correct information. They are passing along misinformation, too."

The grant would pay 75 percent of the cost of the program, dubbed PACE for Pregnancy: Alternatives, Care, Education, the first year and decreasing amounts each following year.

It would provide money for a psychiatric nurse for follow-up counseling for pregnant adolescents, emotional care, nutrition information, financial planning and goal setting.

"THESE GIRLS have to know what they are going to do in the future," Ms. Lindensmith said. "Does life end with birth? They say there are alternatives to pregnancy but abortion is the only one readily available."

Contributing to the statistics on pregnancy before marriage is the fact that American girls are reaching puberty at increasingly earlier ages, marrying later and being unwilling to abstain from sexual activity until they are married. "About one-third of the girls who came to the Common Ground clinic for pregnancy tests and birth control information during July were pregnant,"

Ms. Lee said. "Most people we see in the clinic are from south Oakland County and a fair number are from Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills."

She believes many Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills girls "go directly to abortion clinics because they have the money to do that."

Ms. Lindensmith said she hoped the Birmingham Schools would continue a unit on birth control offered for the first time last year to eighth grade students. Several parents objected to the unit for a variety of reasons.

MS. LINDENSMITH said she thought the school program was "carefully considered" and that it "seemed to give as much weight to the importance of values and decision making as the sex act and the mechanics of it."

"I am impressed with the school district's speed in implementing the program," she added. "A lot of school districts are still talking about it and questioning it. Birmingham is doing it. That speaks well of the school system and its knowledge of the needs of young people."

Eight grade "may even be too late for some kids," she said.

The Birmingham Board of Education agreed at its July 17 meeting to continue the unit during the coming year. Last year, parents were invited to attend open houses at which they could review the information and, if they chose, elect to have their children excluded from the class.

At that meeting, Steve Webster, a Deputy Junior High teacher who teaches the birth control unit to eighth graders, congratulated the board on its "courage to present the material. I hope you have the same courage to continue it."

Webster said a total of 16 students throughout the school district elected not to take the unit last year. "I ask that you not penalize the larger number of children who want to know," he added.

Webster said most parents did not attend the open houses. He urged all parents to attend regardless of their opinion.

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