

Integrating a Social Determinants of Health Approach in Teen Pregnancy Prevention

Mobilizing a Community Health Worker to Reach Teens and their Families

October 2015

Background

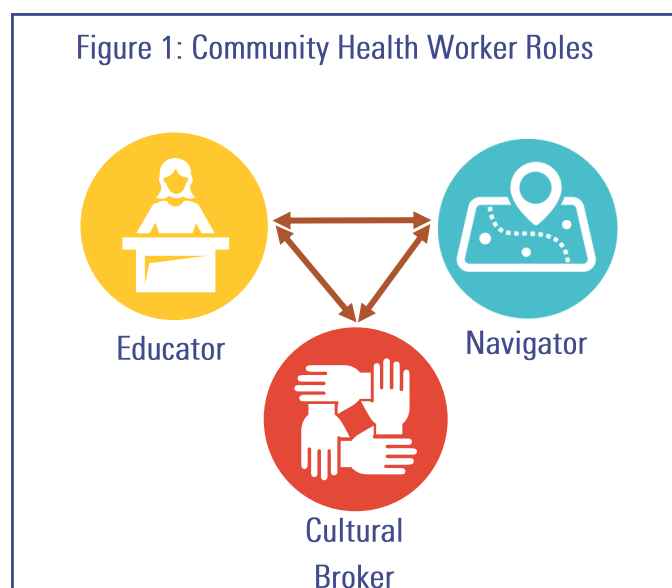
Despite continuing advances in the United States health care system, disparities still exist when extending these benefits to the most vulnerable populations. The Institute of Medicine report, *Unequal Treatment*, recommended addressing health care disparities through community involvement, specifically the involvement of community health workers (CHWs).¹

The use of CHWs has been identified as an effective strategy to meet basic health needs of individuals, particularly in low-income communities and countries.² Mobilizing community members to deliver basic health services to the communities they live in, is a concept that has been around for at least 50 years. Early CHW models include the Chinese barefoot doctor program and Thai village health volunteers. The Declaration of Alma Ata (1978), an international conference on primary care, identified CHWs as one of the cornerstones of comprehensive, primary care as well as an “advocate for the community and an agent of social change.”³

CHW effectiveness studies have demonstrated that CHWs:

- ◆ Contribute to improved health outcomes through intervention, prevention, and health promotion efforts
- ◆ Deliver culturally competent care which leads to greater patient satisfaction
- ◆ Help reduce health care disparities through their role in patient navigation
- ◆ Implement efforts based on behavioral change theories
- ◆ Support effective chronic disease management²

CHWs represent many roles (Figure 1) and job titles, including promotores, lay health advisors, patient navigators, and peer health educators.



While the titles and roles of CHWs vary depending on context, they have many characteristics in common. For example, CHWs typically live in the communities they serve, bring expertise based on their knowledge of their communities, often focus on hard to reach populations, and have a strong commitment to their communities that often rely on them for advice, support, and assistance.

In 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in partnership with the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health Offices of Adolescent Health (OAH) and Population Affairs (OPA) funded nine state- and community-based organizations in high need communities as part of the *Teen Pregnancy Prevention: Integrating Services, Programs, and Strategies through Community-Wide Initiatives*.

JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI) is one of five national organizations funded to provide training and technical assistance to these grantees, and focuses on one of the main components of the initiative, “Working with Diverse Communities.” This component aims to raise awareness of the relationship between teen pregnancy and social determinants of health, and to help partners integrate a “social determinants approach” into their teen pregnancy prevention efforts.

What Are Social Determinants of Health?

- ◆ Social determinants of health are factors found where we live, learn, work and play that increase or decrease our chances of a health outcome such as teen pregnancy.^{4,5}



One of the grantees, the *South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (SC Campaign)*, focuses their CDC/OAH project work in two South Carolina counties, Spartanburg and Horry. Over the last few years, JSI provided technical assistance to the *SC Campaign* and one of their Spartanburg community partners, *BirthMatters*, on the use of a CHW model in the city of Spartanburg, to reach vulnerable youth and address feasible social determinants related to teen sexual and reproductive decision making and behaviors.



BirthMatters is a non-profit organization located in the city of Spartanburg, SC. *BirthMatters* has a history of training young women to be “community doulas” through the “HealthConnect One” curriculum⁶ and is dedicated to supporting young women who are pregnant and parenting, as well as providing outreach and education to teens about making sexual reproductive decisions. Recently, *BirthMatters* incorporated teen pregnancy prevention as an element of its effort to support the healthy development of young women.

BirthMatters began partnering with the *SC Campaign* in 2012 and implemented evidence-based programs such as “Making Proud Choices,” “Be Proud! Be Responsible!” and the video series “17 Days” with 12-19 year olds in select Spartanburg community based settings. In partnership with the *SC Campaign*, *BirthMatters* expanded on this experience and developed a CHW position to focus on teen pregnancy prevention.

This case study illustrates how *SC Campaign’s* partner, *BirthMatters*, uses the CHW model to reach and serve the needs of teens and their families who reside in public housing developments in the city of Spartanburg. It underscores the important role that CHWs play in addressing the contextual factors related to teen pregnancy.

The *SC Campaign’s* “Not Right Now, Put Pregnancy on Pause” Spartanburg initiative was funded in 2010 by the CDC/OAH to ensure:

- ◆ High quality teen pregnancy prevention programs and services are available to Spartanburg youth.
- ◆ Youth have access to teen pregnancy prevention services tailored to their unique needs.
- ◆ Public schools are delivering evidence-based pregnancy prevention programs.
- ◆ Young people who are sexually active have access to condoms and other forms of contraception.
- ◆ Parents and/or trusted adults are having open, honest conversations with their children about love, sex, and relationships.

The Community

Over the past five years, teen birth rates have declined across the nation, South Carolina, and Spartanburg County (Figure 2). The teen birth rate in Spartanburg County declined 48% from 2008-2013. From 2012-2013, the teen birth rate decreased by 20% in the county. In addition to this impressive decline, the disparity in birth rates between blacks and whites was almost eliminated.

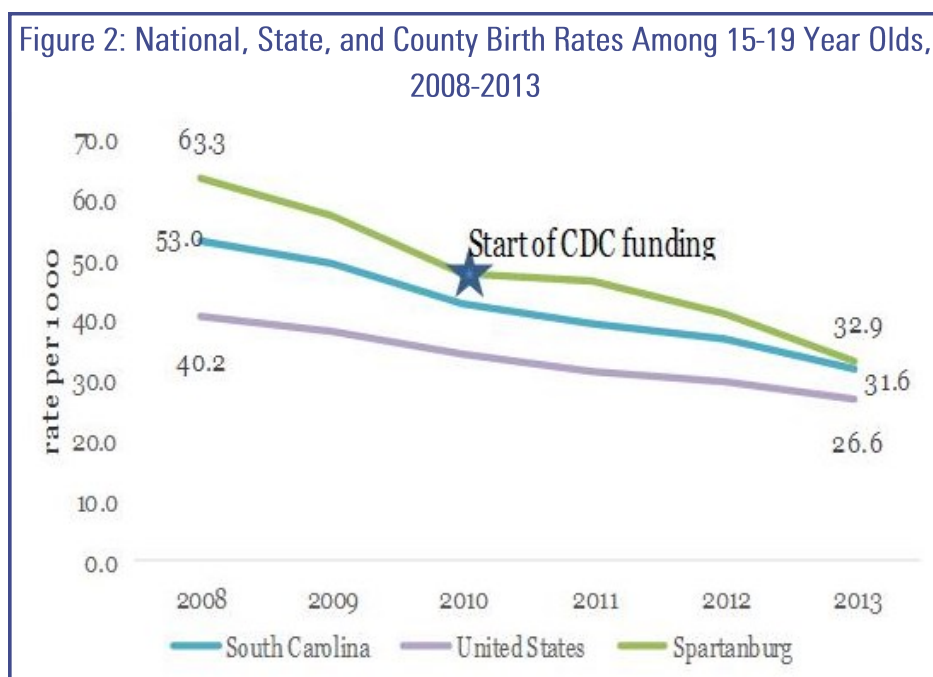
BirthMatters Community Health Worker Program

BirthMatters took a grass-roots approach to recruiting a CHW through *Community Voices*, a weekly discussion-based training program hosted in a city of Spartanburg public housing development priority neighborhood. This neighborhood was selected based upon the increased need for services, especially for Black and Hispanic youth. *Community Voices* had two main goals: 1) to inform and empower women with knowledge about various health issues, and 2) recruit a teen pregnancy prevention CHW from the community. After obtaining buy-in from the neighborhood association, residents were invited to an “interest fair” to learn more about *Community Voices*.

Community Voices participants were required to make a commitment to participate in ten, 2-hour sessions each week and upon completion would receive a certificate of completion. A stipend and lunch were provided to all participants. Discussion topics included living with HIV, alcohol/substance dependence, interpersonal violence, adverse childhood experiences (e.g., sexual abuse), and intimate partner violence. Of the 21 attendees, 19 women ranging from 19-68 years of age received a certificate of completion for finishing the ten week program.

Through this program, *BirthMatters* hired Chelle, a long-time resident of one of the three public housing developments where the *Community Voices* program was held. A single mother of two teenage sons, Chelle was drawn to the topics discussed at *Community Voices* because they reflected the challenges many in her community faced.

During the year after completing *Community Voices*, Chelle attended trainings and workshops to build on her experience as a community advocate and equip her for the CHW role. Since June 2014, she has reached over 50 families via different activities and avenues.



Source: South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

Multiple Roles of the BirthMatters Teen Pregnancy Prevention Community Health Worker

The work of *BirthMatters* teen pregnancy prevention CHW is responsive to the needs of the residents in her community. Chelle is an educator, a navigator, and a cultural broker between parents and their children.



Educator

Being a mother of teenage boys, Chelle has been able to connect with other teens in the housing development. “I know what they’re going through,” she explains. “Teens need someone to listen to them, not judge them.” She has become well known for her approachability and accessibility, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as teen sexual activity. She also connects with teens in her community using fun events, like hosting a hot dog stand. In this informal way, she established trust with teens in her community and invited them to participate in “17 Days”, a video-based curriculum that walks teens through different relationship scenarios .



Chelle (right) and her 17 year old son (left)

On a monthly basis, Chelle meets with 6-10 youth at a time to discuss the video and provide information about *The Point*, a nearby teen-friendly clinic. Most of the teens she reaches are males, between 14-18 years.



Navigator

The Point is a clinic that serves teens in the city of Spartanburg by providing sexual and reproductive health counseling and preventive health services (e.g., contraceptives). Not all teens are comfortable seeking reproductive health services or know how to access care. Chelle uses the “17 Days” video to introduce the concept of clinical care and to refer the teens she meets to *The Point*. While the clinic is accessible by public transportation, navigating the health care system can be a barrier. She often helps teens set up appointments and accompanies them to the clinic. Chelle also provides referrals to ensure teens are able to access a variety of behavioral and social services, including substance abuse treatment and counseling programs.

Chelle’s work is not limited to educating the community and linking teens to clinical and social services. Viewing teen pregnancy prevention as one part of a wholistic approach, she believes it important to “walk alongside each teen,” following up with them, holding them accountable for their decisions, and remaining non-judgmental if they make mistakes. While the majority of her work is at the individual level, the impact of her work has had a ripple effect in the housing development and larger community. She has become a resource for more than just sexual and reproductive health and is known to help people navigate the public transportation system to access clinical services, educational and employment opportunities, and even to go grocery shopping.



Cultural Broker

Parents play an important role in preventing teens' sexual risk taking behaviors.^{7,8}

Both general parent-teen communication and communication about sexual health topics (e.g., pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), condoms, and contraception), have been associated with preventing teens' sexual risk taking behaviors.^{9,10} However, teens often report that their parents are reluctant to initiate conversations about sex, or that their parents assume their children are sexually active if they bring the topic up.

CHWs can play a strategic role as cultural brokers between teens and their parents. As Chelle shared, "Everybody can't talk to their mother...they don't want people to judge them." In her work, she has come across parents who are resistant to their children having access to contraception. Instead of being discouraged, she views their resistance as an opportunity to share accurate information about different contraceptive methods, and to engage parents in conversations about the importance of preventive health care, including pregnancy prevention. Chelle encourages parents to take ownership of these conversations, coaching them and making herself available to provide support in the process. Her role as a "cultural broker" has been instrumental in equipping parents with knowledge about contraceptive methods, for their teenagers, and increasing parent-child communication about sensitive topics. While many parents still ask her to speak to their children, she is slowly turning the responsibility back to parents themselves.

A year since she started in the position, Chelle reflects back on the little changes in her community. A sense of trust has been created through her work in the community: "Trust is hard, a lot of people don't want you in their business."

Conclusions

CHWs play an important role in addressing social determinants related to teen pregnancy. As this case study illustrated, CHWs can be successful in increasing teens' access to reproductive and sexual health education, health care, and social services; improving parent-teen communication; enabling teens to use public transportation to access services; and increasing the number of trusted adults in a teen's life. Combined, these multi-level efforts mitigate the often challenging and stressful environments with which youth in vulnerable communities are confronted.

Though most CHW programs in the U.S. have been grant-funded and relatively small, there is a growing movement to include CHWs as part of care teams through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as a way to increase providers' accountability for the management of population health outcomes. Various policies and programs such as those supported by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation are supporting the demonstration of care models that include CHWs, and some states are testing strategies for reimbursing CHWs through Medicaid waivers.¹¹ Investing in CHWs is a sustainable strategy for community-wide teen pregnancy prevention efforts to build the capacity of community members and leverage effective, reimbursable community-based prevention efforts.

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