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ICH and Mass Alliance for Teen Pregnancy: success in partnering

Teen pregnancy rates in Massachusetts are lower these days than in the past, but there is still more that can be done to reduce them. For over ten years, Institute for Community Health (ICH) has worked in partnership with the Massachusetts Alliance for Teen Pregnancy (the Alliance), a non-profit organization that supports communities seeking evidence-based solutions to the complex issues associated with teen pregnancy. This successful partnership has entered a new era with the award of a five-year federal grant - the *Youth First* project.

The goal of the grant, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is to assist the Western Massachusetts communities of Springfield and Holyoke in reducing their rates of teen pregnancy through using effective community-wide strategies to enhance access to quality sexual health education and reproductive health services.

"This is a big project with a lot of players," says Jessica Waggett, evaluator at ICH. *Youth First* is an initiative that is guided by the community. Thus, in the first year of the grant, ICH has worked in collaboration with *Youth First's* lead organizations, the Alliance and the YEAH! Network, as well as numerous local organizations and community members— including young people themselves.

As stated by Waggett, a critical step to a successful public health program – especially one in a "high-profile area" such as teen pregnancy – is conducting a comprehensive community needs and resources assessment. By determining the communities' resources and gaps up front with input from community members, it helps identify targeted teen pregnancy prevention strategies and use resources effectively that can make a "strong impact," she says.

The needs and resources assessment presented an opportunity for ICH to foster community partners' knowledge and skills around evaluation. One of the values ICH brings to their partner organizations is to "build capacity" and to provide them with ICH's resources to continue to "make data-informed decisions" as they carry out a program. As one part of the assessment, ICH met with *Youth First's* local collaborating clinics to understand their infrastructure, organizational capacity, and clinical practices to identify areas for the *Youth First* initiative to support their efforts to deliver quality, evidence-informed adolescent reproductive health services. ICH met with multi-disciplinary teams of clinic staff–clinicians, administrative staff and IT specialists—and continues to have conversations with them about collecting reproductive health service visit data to help build their capacity to gather and understand the data to identify gaps and enhance their services.

Results of this CDC grant, in its first year alone, are already significant. After working through the fall of 2011 with ICH evaluators, clinics have increased knowledge and capacity to collect the appropriate data to inform changes in their practices, which they have begun to implement, and their data has shown that these transformations have resulted in improvements in their clinical care. Erica Fletcher, project coordinator for Youth First, says: "The ICH team has been crucial to the first-year successes of the Youth First initiative. They are experts at helping agencies and individuals use data to improve their services for young people, from quality implementation of sexuality education curricula to youth-friendly delivery of reproductive health services. As part of the "face" of the Alliance in Springfield and Holyoke, ICH is a trusted partner in building local professionals' capacity to prevent teen pregnancy."

"We are helping organizations make decisions," says ICH evaluator Elisa Friedman. ICH uses "mixed methods" of data collection, and Friedman says people gain a better understanding of the issues by having qualitative data as well as quantitative data. "We help people use information in a way they understand." Organizations call on ICH because they "see us as a resource," says Waggett. "People know that when they contract with us, they get a team."