



CATAWBA COUNTY

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CATAWBA COUNTY PROGRAM HONORED BY NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

A Catawba County Department of Social Services program that helped teenagers enrolled in a poverty reduction and teen pregnancy prevention program better understand the myths of government support programs has been named a winner of a 2011 National Association of Counties (NACo) Achievement Award.

The NACo Achievement Awards program, now in its 40th year, gives national recognition to significant and innovative programs that improve county organization, management and service delivery. Catawba County has won 192 awards over the history of the NACo program and has been honored during each of the program's 40 years.

“We are pleased to learn that one of our programs has again been recognized with a NACo Achievement Award,” said John Eller, Director of Catawba County Social Services. “This award recognizes the innovative culture of our department, which always looks for a better way to serve the citizens of Catawba County. A Partnership in Prevention is helping teens make wise decisions about their futures and also saving taxpayer dollars.”

The winning program is called “A Partnership In Prevention”. The Social Services Child Support Unit partnered with the Prevention Unit, which operates the Teen Up program. Teen Up is a poverty reduction and prevention program that focuses on drop out and pregnancy prevention and serves approximately 400 male and female students annually. Social workers provide students, in small group settings, with information and education on the impact of sex and the prevention of teen pregnancy. Students who begin the program as 7th or 8th graders are followed from middle school through high school.

“Child Support has partnered with the Teen Up program to provide information to students regarding the financial implications of teen pregnancy, as well as the reality of government assistance and child support,” said Kristen Sigmon, Child Support Supervisor with Catawba County Social Services. “A child support staff member attends a group session and begins by asking the students to talk about their ‘needs’ each month, meaning cell phone costs, clothes, entertainment and food, and how much they spend on those items. As the conversation continues, there is discussion about benefits available from the government and the child support program, as well as eligibility requirements. The attitude of the teens often implies that, if they get pregnant, they will be able to get all of these services.”

“This misinformed attitude becomes a cycle of behavior and a sense of entitlement”, said Judy Ingold, Social Worker III who works with the Teen Up program. “An important by-product of this discussion is that myths attached with ‘living off of government assistance’ are dispelled. Ideally, the visits take place after the students have participated in the “Baby, Think it Over” program, through which students experience a simulation of caring for a baby during a week or weekend period and are then brought into a discussion surrounding financial support for themselves as a single mother or father.”

This unique partnership began approximately two years ago. The Child Support unit began looking for more innovative ways of outreach including a way to appeal to teens with information about the long term financial obligations of raising a child. Sigmon met with Ingold to discuss the idea of participating in some of the Teen Up group sessions in area middle and high schools.

Information regarding the maximum benefits available through Food and Nutritional Services (formerly known as

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Food Stamps) Work First, and Medicaid are provided to the students, based on the scenario of single parent and child. The students learn the average childcare cost for an infant in Catawba County and that daycare assistance is not always available due to funding constraints. Minimum wage employment is also discussed and factored into the student's simulated "budget". Child support is explained, with an emphasis on the fact that child support is received on the basis of an individual's motivation to pay and cannot be factored in on a monthly budget as it is not a guaranteed form of monthly income. Basic addition and subtraction, using the numbers provided by the teens regarding their "needs", demonstrates that minimum wage employment will not support the teens themselves, much less an infant.

Catawba County Social Services has long been working on these prevention programs because a high teenage pregnancy rate brings substantial financial costs such as increased Medicaid costs that impact local, state and federal budgets. Welfare reform prompted a need to provide teenagers with correct information regarding the availability of governmental assistance and the shift in eligibility requirements that made benefits a short-term form of assistance versus a long-term way of life.

"It is essential that teenagers be able to make informed choices regarding sex, education, and relationships so that they are prepared for the consequences of their actions," Ingold added. "Because they are kids themselves, teen parents are uninformed when they visit the child support office and often have unrealistic expectations regarding the financial obligations of a parent not currently in his or her home. These expectations include the ability of the other parent to support a child, how child support obligations are enforced and what happens when the non-custodial parent refuses to obtain employment. Some teen parents are surprised to learn that child support enforcement continues to introduce legislation toughening laws regarding support and that it is not as easy to evade that obligation as it may have been in the past. Teens entering into sexual relationships need to understand the impact of teen pregnancy on their life and the life of their child."

The Prevention Unit uses outcomes as a tool to measure the success of the program. One is that no pregnancies occur among those teens who are in the program. Students are also given surveys, as they begin the program and after they complete it, to measure knowledge and attitudes about finishing school and teen pregnancy. For fiscal year 2009-2010, 7th through 9th grade levels averaged a combined improvement rate of 15% from the pre to post survey comparisons. Pregnancies have been reduced with program participation and graduation rates have increased. Students demonstrate shock and surprise when they learn benefit amounts and eligibility requirements of government programs. Students are also surprised when they find out what tax money is used for and what services are provided through taxes.

"One idea has blossomed into a partnership which has impacted teenagers across Catawba County by empowering them to make more informed decisions," Sigmon concluded. "Teenagers have a better understanding of government benefit programs and realize that using those benefits as a method of sustaining families long-term is not a good option. These young people understand that those benefits are only short-term 'band-aids' and that they must own the consequences of their actions. The Partnership in Prevention is clearly an illustration of the success of units within Social Services that move outside of their own program silos and cooperate effectively to address shared issues."

"NACo awards demonstrate Catawba County's continuing effort to find innovative and creative ways to deliver the very best services to our citizens," said Kitty Barnes, Chair of the Catawba County Board of Commissioners. "My fellow commissioners and I are very proud of this national recognition."

The NACo Achievement Award will be formally presented to Catawba County at the Association's annual conference in July 11-15, 2011.

"Keeping the Spirit Alive Since 1842!"