

Child and Parent Center Vicksburg, Mississippi

Making a difference during a budget crunch



*Erma Driver,
Executive Director
of the Child and
Parent Center*

Operating on a shoe-string budget is nothing new for Erma Driver. The Executive Director of the Child and Parent Center in Vicksburg, Miss., Driver refuses to cut any programs, despite having lost \$100,000 in funding since July 2010.

Formerly known as Vicksburg Child Abuse Prevention, the organization has evolved into a group dedicated to serving families as a whole and is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary this year. “We have something to address each component of family,” Driver says. “We wrap our services around each client to make sure they are whole when they leave.”

Teen pregnancy prevention, a desperately needed program, is not even part of the center’s budget. Instead, the program is funded by service organizations and private donations. Mississippi has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation. In Warren County alone, where the center is located, 132 teen mothers between the ages of 10-17 gave birth last year. “Mississippi has the highest infant mortality rate in the United States and, by and large, the entire state is under the gun when it comes to teen pregnancy,” Driver says.

Prevention specialist runs RealCare Baby program

Prevention Specialist Terry Lockhart is a soft-spoken man from a small town in Mississippi with a clear love for children. In addition to his other full-time responsibility



as drug and violence prevention coordinator, Lockhart oversees the RealCare Baby program at the Child and Parent Center. Two local schools take turns using the Center’s five infant simulators during the fall and spring semesters. Lockhart goes into the classes to give students the information needed to care for the babies and to do a demonstration on proper care. When the parent permission slips are returned, the teacher allows students to check out the simulator overnight. “If we had more, we would send the babies out for a longer period,” Lockhart says. “Many of the kids request to do it longer, but the demand is too high.”

The Child and Parent Center’s two RealCare Pregnancy Profile Simulators are also used at the schools. Lockhart

(continued next page)

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- Terry Lockhart, Prevention Specialist

says, “It’s cool to see the guys walking around with the bellies in class.”

Changing students’ minds

To help measure the program’s effectiveness, Lockhart uses pre-test and post-test questionnaires from the RealCare curriculum. When the initial presentation is given, students complete a 35-question survey to measure their thoughts about these critical issues. At the end of the simulation, they complete a second questionnaire. “When we surveyed the last class of ten students, their minds had totally changed,” Lockhart says. “It definitely makes you feel like you’re making an impact.”

Driver agrees. “The comments really rock you,” she says. “Students are very sincere about their experience. Many of them say, ‘Because I worked with the dolls, I think I’ll wait until I’m married to have a baby,’ or ‘I didn’t know that a baby could be so expensive.’”



At a recent health fair, students approached Lockhart and introduced him to their parents. “Mom, this is Mr. Lockhart. He did the RealCare Parenting class.’ The parents thanked me, saying, ‘You helped my child decide to wait,’” Lockhart says.

Facing future challenges

Driver and Lockhart acknowledge the challenges their community faces. The Center would like to include more details regarding safe sex and abstinence but, so far, they have not received approval from the school district



to implement more details. At one point, the city had a strong teen pregnancy coalition that provided small grants to fund the project, but has been discontinued. Securing funding continues to be a difficult priority. “There’s not a day that goes by without someone seeking our assistance or inquiring information about our services,” Driver says. “It tugs at my heart greatly.”

Nevertheless, both Driver and Lockhart remain optimistic and hope to extend the program to surrounding areas. The center is doing more fundraisers than ever before and Driver has been focused on writing grant proposals. The Center is the only organization that uses the infants and pregnancy simulators in Warren County. There are at least two other agencies who include teen pregnancy prevention as a program.

Driver is encouraged by the area’s overwhelming response. “The community just loves what we do and volunteering has skyrocketed. We’re inspired by the people we’re committed to help,” Driver says. “Every day we come to work, there is a person who is positively affected by what we do.”

To get more information on the Child and Parent Center in Vicksburg, visit www.capcenter.net.