

Opening Remarks
Linda Lausell Bryant, Inwood House Executive Director
Citywide Dialogue on Teen Pregnancy
November 16th, 2010

Good morning stakeholders and partners and good morning choir! Welcome to the kickoff day of the CWD on Teen Pregnancy Prevention & Intervention. Because you are the choir, we will try not to preach. We will try to harmonize with you instead so that together we can hit more notes than any of us can do alone.

So why is Inwood House, a youth services organization spearheading a Citywide Dialogue on Teen Pregnancy? We have been serving NYC youth since 1830 and have been dedicated to preventing teen pregnancy and changing the trajectories of pregnant and parenting young women, their partners and their children, BUT we have been doing so in program, funding and policy environments that are fragmented, that address some aspects of teen pregnancy and not others, and some that do not address it at all.

We have worked to reach youth with our programs during those cycles when teen pregnancy was not “in vogue”, but whether it was “in” or not, we frequently confronted the lack of an integrated framework for understanding, let alone addressing, the issue of teen pregnancy, its causes and its consequences for the affected teens as well as our City as a whole. Some folks “get it” but prefer to stay away from the politics that have co-opted the discussion. And though we have some of the best youth development programs in the country right here in New York City, adolescent sexual development is too often an overlooked or ignored dimension of youth development.

What we know from our experience is this: When we talk about teen pregnancy, we are talking about many things—education, health, youth development, housing, violence, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, family. A 16 yr old is a 16 yr old is a 16 yr old. A 16 year old is still a kid – pregnancy doesn’t make them an adult. Their minds are still developing. Development matters and programs have to be developmentally appropriate. Boys Count! Fathers Count! Fathers of the babies and also fathers of girls who find themselves pregnant are important! Yet for our pregnant girls, most, that is 95% of them, have no contact with their biological fathers. Most of our teenage fathers have no contact with their biological fathers as well. Teen pregnancy is a cause and an effect related to persistent intergenerational poverty and yet it is absolutely addressable.

We also know that in order to really see the kind of difference we would like to see, we cannot do it alone. And what is it we want to see? You know what it is—because you work on it in your organizations every day. We want a city where teens do not become parents before they are ready and because they do have hopes, dreams and plans for a future. We want a city where they have tools and skills to make sound decisions and they have guidance when they are confused or conflicted. That’s not all—we want a city where a teen girl who becomes pregnant can get the support and guidance she needs to get back on track so she too can fulfill hopes and dreams for a future, including a future as a young parent. Do you know why Bristol Palin can dance with the stars? It is because she has a network of support including a family. Families count! We want all of our teens to have the support they need to aim for the stars and to reach them.

I am proud of Inwood House’s work in helping teens to prevent teen pregnancy and to support pregnant and parenting teens to help break cycles of poverty, abuse and neglect. But we can’t achieve this for all teens by ourselves. So that’s what we are here to work toward: Reducing the number of teens who become pregnant and to change the trajectories of those who do become pregnant or are already parenting. 8000+ babies are born to teens in NYC every year. What odds do they face?

Ten years ago, even 20 years ago, a pregnant or parenting teen faced overwhelming odds. Today, in this economy, the picture is even bleaker and even when the economy gets better, the opportunities for those who

are under-educated, with little or no work experience are not there and won't be there. So those with responsibility for the next generation face great odds as will their children.

On the other hand, there is also a climate of opportunity right now. The federal government has recently bid out \$100 million in grants to fund pregnancy prevention programs. We are in New York City, where the Mayor has initiated a Commission on Economic Opportunity to address poverty, and has indicated that teen pregnancy is a priority. And, in a city that is famous for not letting others tell us what to do, smoking has been reduced and life expectancy has gone up – so I know we can do this!

Today is a dialogue that can and should lead to action. We will begin to develop a blueprint for action that we can share with our government leaders but also that can be a guide for us to leverage the collective knowledge, expertise and will that is in this room. It will be a little bit like baking a cake with 200 close friends—we need a common vision—what kind of cake do we want to make? We need to take inventory of what ingredients we already have in the cupboard, we need to know what ingredients we lack or where the gaps are, we need to know what we need to buy. Then we need directions/steps/ processes, we need planning and collaboration. The good news is we are in the kitchen already—that's why we are here. So prepare to think about what we have, what works, where the gaps are, in programs, policy, funding and how we can prioritize strategies to address these based on opportunities that are at hand.

I have to thank every member of the planning committee who helped us get to today, and Janet Kelley, who taught me the power of collaboration and who worked to help us reach out to all of you and to the Tiger Foundation for underwriting this dialogue. And now, without further delay, I turn the mike over to New York State's leading advocate for children—The Commissioner of the NYS Office of Children & family Services—Gladys Carrion!

Gladys Carrion, Commission of the Office of Children and Family Services
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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to be part of the Citywide Dialogue on Teen pregnancy. It is my pleasure to be here with Linda, the Inwood House family and so many people committed to improving outcomes for girls and addressing the needs of pregnant and parenting girls.

You have taken a critical first step by recognizing the importance of initiating a conversation with stake holders, partners and girls that will help forge a common vision, define the issues and develop a blueprint that will guide the collective work ahead of you. Working collaboratively across agencies, programs and issues will strengthen everyone's efforts to improve outcomes for girls. We can no longer afford to work in silos guided by good intentions but hampered by limited capacity, few resources and ever growing need.

While New York State has made substantial progress in reducing teen pregnancy and that is a testament to the hard work of many in this room much remains to be done. The teen pregnancy rate remains far too high for Latinas and African American girls in New York State. Our ability to design effective gender specific interventions and strategies that support girls is impeded by the lack of data. At my agency, the Office of Children and Families we are unable to identify how many girls in foster care are pregnant or parenting. Our data system doesn't have a field for that information. We don't require local counties to track that information and anyway our automated record system doesn't support the collection of that information.

In foster care, we have common measures of assessment across programs without regard to the population served. For instance, foster care agencies that serve pregnant and parenting programs aren't required to provide parenting or relationship classes nor is that a factor in measuring effectiveness. Agencies do it because it is good practice. We have no state wide quality standards for licensing or approving a foster care program for pregnant

girls or mother baby programs for parenting teens. We are working to change our data systems, to develop program standards and better define what constitutes best practices. We need to have a gender specific lens that understands the unique needs of girls, and how best to deliver the services, support and interventions to maximize our impact and their success. Despite our successes, too many of our systems are failing our girls. A recent study conducted by my agency tracked 500 young women that were remanded and placed in our juvenile justice system in the early 90's and we followed them over a 10 to 12 year period and we found that by the age of 28:

- 81% girls were rearrested for a felony;
- 69% girls were convicted
- 32% girls were incarcerated;
- 64% girls were named as alleged perpetrators of child maltreatment;
- 42% girls named as confirmed perpetrators of child maltreatment;
- And 90% of the girls migrate into adult criminal justice or child welfare system by age 28;
- Over half of the sample girls, 53% became clients of both criminal justice and child welfare in early adulthood;

This research tells me that we are failing. We have failed by not providing the interventions that stop the cycle of early parenthood, poverty, crime, abuse and neglect. We have failed to give hope to our young women and their families. We haven't provided them with the services and supports that make a real difference in their lives. We need to work together to develop and create programs grounded in best practices and informed by the evidence on what works. In NYS we are changing our practice. We have a growing body of research that provides us with insight into adolescent behavior, adolescent brain development, and the impact of trauma and poverty. We are incorporating this knowledge in our training, our funding strategies, in the development of programs and to inform statewide reform efforts.

Clearly we are in an era where new money, new resources and additional staff are not just scarce, but non-existent. We are facing historic challenges in this fiscal climate, and NYS is not alone in its struggle to maintain funding for core, essential services. However difficult the challenge though, it does not mean that we won't go forward. It does mean we need to re-engineer our systems using our best thinking and values to create change. We need to take an honest look at the child welfare, juvenile justice and youth development systems in our state and be courageous in our assessments and decisions. Those activities that are time honored but demonstrate little effectiveness need to be re-tooled or eliminated to make resources available for strategies that are more promising. As we look at the hard choices about what goes and what is continued, the experience and strategic vision of all of you needs to be heard.

Times are extremely difficult, and it is easy to become discouraged. I know I am sometimes. I find myself in the untenable position of eliminating or reducing funding for critical supports. We see so much need and feel we aren't doing enough. We see the gaps and the feel the frustration of our communities, neighborhoods and young people. But we cannot become paralyzed by this. I believe that strategic action, commitment, and passion will carry us through this period of crisis. This is the time when we must re-evaluate our priorities and make the hard choices.

I believe that this is also an opportunity work smarter, use the funds we have more strategically, to rebuild a system that is more responsive, less traditional, and more community based. We need to look around and see who our partners are and forge better alignments. Much like you are doing today. I believe that we can and must continue to strive for significant change and improvements across our systems. While the lack of resources and funding gaps may slow us down, they must not take us off track. We must redouble our efforts to build the state and local commitment to change that works. I appreciate the opportunity to be here and join with you in the collective efforts to strengthen the supports for our girls. Thank you.

