

Fewer teens giving birth

Greene County led the state in 2010

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For the first time since 2008, the number of Greene County teenagers giving birth has been deemed “unreportable” by the state — and that’s a good thing.

State data showing that Greene County in 2010 was No. 1 per capita in Iowa for teen pregnancies sent a jolt through the community.

That year, 17 babies were born to local moms ages 15 to 19.

Fresh data from the Iowa Department of Public Health shows the number of babies born to teen mothers in 2014 fell back between one and five — a range the state considers unreportable.

“We want to embrace it, and keep doing what we’re doing,” said Peg Dohrer, a Jefferson resident and Community and Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Coordinator for Carroll-based New Opportunities.

The thing is, the reasons for a drop aren’t as obvious as the reasons for a rise in teen births.

Community health leaders have a good grasp on how and why kids get pregnant, from assessing the area’s poverty level to asking 11th graders how many of them drink and smoke pot. (As of 2014, 28 percent of local 11th graders had smoked marijuana.)

But when the teen birth rate plummets — as it did between 2013 and 2014, when the number of teen births in Greene County went from 13 to “unreportable” — it’s as scientific as assuming the stork just didn’t stop that year at the high school.

Dohrer said it’s important that parents have candid conversations about sex with their teenagers.

“Be an askable parent,” she said. “Try not to act shocked. You have to be prepared for what they’re going to tell you.”

For a five-year period between 2010 and 2014, Greene County’s teen birth rate ranks ninth among Iowa’s 99 counties.

Marshall County ranks first.

During that period, there were 56 teen births in Greene County.

None of Greene County’s neighbors are even in the Top 35.

Webster County ranks 36th, followed by Calhoun County (41st), Carroll County (45th), Boone County (56th), Guthrie County (69th) and Dallas County

BIRTH

FROM PAGE 1

(86th).

For Greene County, the spike in teen births seemingly began in 2009.

In 2007 and 2008, the number of teen births was in the unreportable range.

Then in 2009, the number jumped to 14, followed in 2010 by 17, which topped even the actual number of teen births that year in larger Carroll County. (Carroll County in 2010 had 14 teen births.)

In more recent years, there were 11 teen births locally in both 2011 and 2012, followed by a bump back up to 13 in 2013.

It's pointless to shame the mother, according to Dohrer.

"Shaming isn't going to help them raise their child," she said. "They need our support full force by then."

Dohrer said that although some teen mothers "have raised wonderful children," giving birth while still in high school poses huge obstacles to finishing their education and other goals.

"We need to not fear having uncomfortable conversations," she said.

"We still have hangups on names of body parts," she added.

Coincidentally, between 2008 and 2012, the number of Greene County teens ages 15 to 19 with chlamydia also doubled, from six cases in 2008 to 12 in 2012, according to state data.

For its part, New Opportunities continues to send a registered nurse into Greene County High School to talk more candidly about sexual health with students.

"It's truly a wonderful thing when schools can supplement what they're learning from parents," Dohrer said. "And, frankly, there are a lot of parents who don't want to talk about this."

Greene County's high teen birth rate made it one of only 20 Iowa counties eligible for the Teen Outreach Program, or TOP, a national curriculum in place since this past fall at the high school and alternative school.

New Opportunities and the Greene County Community School District received a grant to implement the program lo-

cally, which focuses on service learning projects.

Dohrer said the program doesn't directly delve into sex ed, but can help lower the teen pregnancy rate.

The program originated in St. Louis in 1978. Its curriculum is updated every two years, Dohrer said.

A new event planned for March at the Webb House and the First United Methodist Church in Jefferson will be geared toward even younger students in grades 7-8 and their parents.

A first-of-its-kind teen awareness event scheduled for 6 to 8 p.m. March 4 will feature dinner, local resources and fun activities hosted by the Greene County Domestic Abuse Council, Greene County Public Health and New Opportunities.

Email youth@assaultcarecenter.org for more information.

It's hoped the event will become an annual affair, Dohrer said.

Outreach like that is about all anyone can do.

"Still," Dohrer said, "rural youth, there's boredom.

"For centuries, when youth are bored, they have sex to pass the time."