

States zero in on out-of-wedlock births

The federal government is enticing states under a law that provides financial aid for abstinence-only programs and bonuses for states with the lowest out-of-wedlock birthrates.

By Richard Wolf
USA TODAY

State and local governments are working faster than ever to reverse one of society's most intractable trends: the rising number of children born out of wedlock.

Municipalities are awash in mayoral task forces, media campaigns and mentoring programs. One Virginia community has gone so far as to raffle off a new car to teen-agers who avoid pregnancy.

The reason for the burst of activity? There's money in it.

Under last year's welfare reform law, states are about to split \$50 million a year in federal aid for education programs that promote sexual abstinence. Even states that objected to abstinence-only programs sought the money.

More tempting still are the potential bonuses for states that do the best job reducing out-of-wedlock birth rates without increasing abortion rates. Next year the federal government will award \$20 million each to as many as five states a year, based on their performance since last month.

With money as a motivator, all 50 states and hundreds of cities and counties are wading in. "Twenty million dollars is a hell of an incentive," says Doug Paterson of Michigan's department of community health.

The task is daunting. About 1.25 million births each year, about one in three, are to unmarried mothers. The figure has been rising for more than 50 years. If that rate continues, half of all births will be out-of-wedlock by 2015.

And the stakes are huge. Nearly half of all adolescent mothers, and 75% of those who remain unmarried, have received welfare by the time their children are 5 years old. The mothers are more likely to drop out of high school and be poor. The children are more likely to be ill or suffer abuse. The girls are more likely to become teen moms themselves.

Welfare reformers didn't merely note the harm of having children out of wedlock when they wrote last year's federal law — they hammered home the point. The first full sentence of the law reads: "Marriage is the foundation of a successful society."

Still, there are some pitfalls in the federal program.

Conservative groups are monitoring every state's abstinence-education programs to see if other methods of birth control are included. If they are, says Amy Stephens of Focus on the Family, a conservative religious organization, "There's going to be an outcry" — and congressional hearings.

Liberal groups fear that by promoting abstinence and dis-



By H. Darr Belsler, USA TODAY

One who has been there: Kathy Funes of Arlington, Va., was 18 and unmarried when she had twins in 1992, forcing her to go on welfare. Now she works for an agency that tries to prevent teen pregnancies.

couraging abortion, states will deny young women a balanced view of their choices. "It could be used to try to coerce young, poor women into making choices that they might not otherwise make," says Sherry Leiwant of the National Organization for Women.

Just determining winners and losers among the states will be difficult. Data on out-of-wedlock births and abortion rates is unreliable at best, nonexistent at worst. California automatically presumes no marriage when the parents have different last names, regardless of age. Five states don't even keep track of abortion statistics.

The ideological and statistical spats threaten the broader effort. Says Tamara Kreinin of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy: "While the adults argue, the kids are getting pregnant."

Virginia has been most organized in its pursuit of the federal bonus. In January, before most states had mobilized, officials decided to organize local communities that would share in any bonus money.

Lynchburg and other central Virginia municipalities are promoting "Marriage Before the Carriage." Youths ages 12 to 21 can enter a drawing for a new car if they haven't fa-

thered or conceived a child in the past year.

Kathy Funes of Arlington, Va., learned the hard way how much of a burden children can be. She was 18 and unmarried when she had twin daughters in 1992, forcing her to go on welfare for two years.

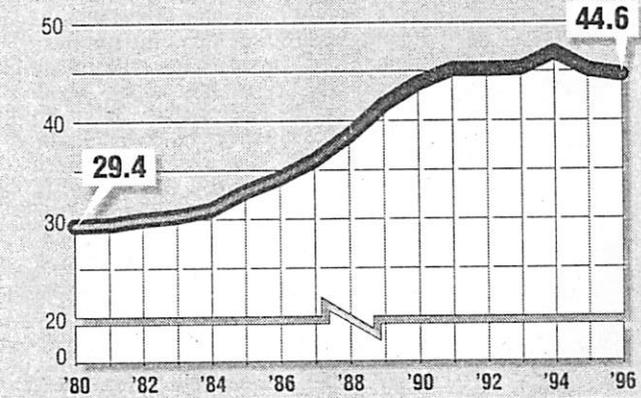
But the kids also motivated her to become part of the solution. Since 1994, she has worked for an agency that tries to stop other teen-agers from getting pregnant — with limited success. Says Funes: "There's only so many that you're going to get through to."

Other state efforts:

► California Gov. Pete Wil-

Out-of-wedlock birthrate high

The rate of unmarried women having babies has dipped recently, but it's still more than 50% higher than it was in 1980. Births per 1,000 unmarried women ages 15-44 annually.



Source: National Center for Health Statistics

By Gary Visgaitis, USA TODAY

son this month unveiled a new advertising campaign to attract mentors for teens as part of the state's "Partnership for Responsible Parenting" program.

► New York Gov. George Pataki has a new task force on out-of-wedlock pregnancy, a new video that warns teen-age boys about the cost of child support and a new infusion of federal welfare aid into the effort.

► Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton held a summit meeting on teen pregnancy prevention and began a \$1 million media campaign on Halloween. The message: "Get a Life First."

► Even the District of Columbia, where two out of three births are to single mothers, has sprung into action. Mayor Marion Barry has appointed a panel to devise solutions.

"They all seem to be starting right about now," says Barbara Strother, head of the district's teen parent assessment project. "I suspect the bonus money has a lot to do with that."

Since 1991, states have been making slow but steady progress. Teen birth rates dropped in every state between 1991 and 1996, ranging from 2.5% in Connecticut to 25% in Vermont. Twelve states cut their overall out-of-wedlock birth rates last year. The national rate rose only from 32.2% to 32.4%.

Researchers say fewer teens are having sex, and more are using contraception. Abortion rates are not causing the improvement in out-of-wedlock birth trends. They have declined from 29 per 1,000 births in 1980 to 24 per 1,000 in 1994.

But teens are just 30% of the problem. Seven in 10 out-of-wedlock children are born to women age 20 and over. To win the bonus money, states must target them as well.

"There aren't models that have been tried," says Kristin Moore, president of Child Trends, a research group. "States are really having to start from scratch."