

# Nurturing dreams

## Mi-APPP helps teen parents reach their life goals

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**BENTON TOWNSHIP** — Becoming a teen parent means growing up in a hurry, becoming responsible for another person and yourself, and navigating the world of work or continuing education while nurturing a new life.

For low-income teens, the challenges are even more daunting, from securing employment and transportation to finding stable housing.

But becoming a parent doesn't

have to be the end of dreams of earning a high school diploma or a college degree, or finding a good-paying job, according to participants in Berrien County's Michigan Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program, or Mi-APPP, offered through the county's Department of Health.

"They let me know that my life's not over, it's just beginning," said Le'Nesha Thomas, 17, of Niles, who signed on with Mi-APPP last year while pregnant with her daughter, Le'Auiaa, now 1-month old.

She is a senior at Niles Alternative School and is learning to co-parent with Daeshawn Bates, 18, the baby's father.

"My daughter has come a long way," said Tonyetta Thomas, who is supporting Le'Nesha in Mi-APPP.

Kyna King, a program specialist who has been with Mi-APPP from its beginning here, said the program is "giving clients the tools that are needed to lead a healthy and productive life. This is not

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John Matuszak /HP Staff

**From left, Kyna King, program specialist with Berrien County's Michigan Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program; Tonyetta Thomas, with one-month-old granddaughter Le'Ausia; and new parents Daeshawn Bates and her daughter, Le'Nesha Thomas. Mi-APPP provides support for teen parents in reaching their goals of completing and continuing their education and finding employment, as well as other needed services.**

## TEEN PARENTS

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always an easy task for some as this is new information, and others just needed help with eliminating some of the barriers that they face and then there are situations that we have to work around the barriers."

Staff members are anxiously waiting to find out if the program, funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, will continue beyond Sept. 30.

King and others are committed to seeing the grant-funded program continue. "This is not just a job for me, it's my passion," King said. "It's my baby."

### Leading the state

In 2014 the Berrien County Health Department became one of five agencies selected to pilot Mi-APPP to connect teen parents with services and to help them reach the goal of self-sufficiency, as well as avoiding additional pregnancies. A high proportion of teen mothers give birth to more than one child.

This year the program served 48 teens and their families. Of those, 14 graduated from high schools in Benton Harbor, Berrien Springs, Niles, St. Joseph and Bridge Academy, as the Niles Alternative School and Dream Academy. Three of the graduates are continuing their educations. Eighteen clients are employed.

The Berrien program has worked with more than 150 clients since 2014. In that time, there have been only two repeat pregnancies.

King said that the Berrien Mi-APPP has become the leading program in the state.

Berrien County was selected as a Mi-APPP site because it has one of the highest teen pregnancies rates in Michigan. In 2015 the teen pregnancy rate here was 28.6 per 1,000 residents, above the state rate. In 2015 there were 189 pregnancies and 136 live births among Berrien County's 4,756 female teenagers.

Teen pregnancies cost Michigan taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars a year in health care, child

welfare, future court and incarceration costs, and lost wages and tax revenue.

### Overcoming obstacles

Staff members of Berrien Mi-APPP are pleased with the success they have had so far, and want to continue to expand their reach in helping struggling families.

King built the program by contacting schools, counselors, probation officers, even stopping young women she saw pushing baby strollers and offering her card.

Mi-APPP is about "healthy relationships," said King. "That's huge. It's about building relationships with the clients. They can see right through you. If they don't think you're sincere, they won't trust you."

Parenting moms and dads ages 14-21, or those who are pregnant, are eligible to sign up and participate. Supportive family members or other adults are included and also attend the Positive Parenting Program, or Triple-P.

Mi-APPP includes family planning information, but is not specifically aimed at preventing pregnancies, staff emphasized. Instead, it aims at teaching life skills and helping clients overcome barriers to success.

Goals include improving the health of the mothers and children; helping the parent finish high school or earn a GED diploma and plan for future education or employment; involving teen fathers in the lives of their children; and strengthening relationships with adults, including family members, teachers and mentors.

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Clients and counselors work on small goals that lead to bigger achievements. This might include things such as obtaining identification or a Social Security card, needed to secure employment.

Finding safe, affordable housing is a "huge barrier" for many clients, who might be homeless and "couch-surfing" among family or acquaintances, Robinson said. This lifestyle becomes even more difficult with a child to care for.

Finding transportation to school, work and day care is another major hurdle.

The counselors have been impressed with how their clients cope from day to day.

One young woman walks the mile and a half to her job every day after dropping her child off at day care.

"She is very courageous," King said.

Robinson noted that this is a voluntary program, and the clients have to want to succeed.

"It's not a hand-out," Robinson said. "We're not here to be your mom or your dad. It's goal-based. This is the teen's program. They are not mandated or court-ordered. Most teens want the services."

King said she has seen Le'Nesha and Daeshawn make a lot of progress.

"I have seen so much growth in this couple," King said. She recalled watching Daeshawn holding his daughter and seeing the loving look in his eyes. "I have seen a totally different Daeshawn."

She also has witnessed Le'Nesha speak out more, even addressing the Mi-APPP steering committee about what the program has meant for her. "She really blew my socks off."

The principal of Le'Nesha's school was so impressed with the program that he became a member of the steering committee, King said.

Le'Nesha said she would have likely "slacked off" in school with her added parental responsibilities if it hadn't been for Mi-APPP. She received a care package with clothes, blankets and other necessities when her daughter was born.

In addition to graduating high school, she said her goals now include helping others in similar situations. She already has been able to refer a friend to Mi-APPP.

"There have been so many people helping me, and I want to give back," she said. "I want to show others what it's like, and to give them my experience."

### Crossing bridges

If they're willing to grab on, Mi-APPP has a lot to offer its clients.

One key component is the "Bridges Out of Poverty" program, provided through a partnership with the St. Vincent DePaul Society. This teaches such skills as budgeting and other financial skills.



Provided photo

**Torius Meeks learns how to make a nutritious smoothie drink as part of the Michigan Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Program's healthy cooking class. The program emphasizes getting teen dads involved in the lives of their children, as well as assisting them in building independent life skills.**

A recent session focused on job training and placement opportunities through Mosaic, in Benton Harbor, which operates a cafe and culinary training program, a thrift store and a lawn care business, along with its "Jobs for Life" classes. Instructors also talked about one-year certificate programs through Lake Michigan College in careers from casino management to medical technician.

With Michigan State University Extension, Mi-APPP has been holding classes on cooking healthy meals on a budget. Participants go home with a cook book and ingredients to prepare nutritious meals.

Safe sleep classes are offered to instruct new parents on the methods that will help prevent smothering deaths of infants.

Promoting continuing education is another major component. This can include returning to a traditional school, arranging for online instruction at home, as well as tutoring services. It's all about finding the best fit for each individual, Robinson said.

One 12-week series focus-

es on self-esteem and uses a "vision board" on which participants spell out their goals, from finishing high school to buying a car.

It's gratifying to see the clients realize that they can achieve these things with the right planning, King said. "You can see the light go off. It's so empowering for them."

### Fatherly advice

One unique aspect of Mi-APPP is the engagement of the fathers.

Case manager Charlie Patterson said he teaches the young men the importance of being a presence in the lives of their children.

"We are their first teacher," said Patterson, the father of four who grew up in a single-parent household. "I tell them 'The best title in the world is a father.'"

Daeshawn Bates said he is learning such skills as budgeting and starting a bank account, all things that will help his child.

"It's not just us, there's her, too," Bates has realized. Staff members pointed out that many young men want to be active in their life of their child, but are some-

times shut out.

"It's not just for the moms, it's for the dads," Robinson said. Counselors help couples learn how to co-parent. Three fathers who participated were awarded joint custody of their children.

One 16-year-old dad has been to every Bridges Out of Poverty workshop, attended cooking classes and has found a summer job.

Supportive adults are another key ingredient in the success of clients.

"Charlie has been her backbone," said Tonyetta Thomas of the support her daughter has received. "I'm her backbone, too. I will use any way I can to support them. We've been through some hardships, but I'm not going to let that hold me back. We're going to be all right. I'm a strong parent."

### Making progress

Staff members are experienced enough to know that not everyone is going to succeed at first, but they hope that the lessons will linger until they take root.

"We say it's OK if you're not ready. We keep the door open and let them know we're here," said program supervisor Susan Holcomb. "If they stumble, we hope they have the courage to come back."

Mi-APPP staff hopes they are coming back, as well.

Kyna King said they have spent much of the last three years building relationships not just with clients, but with the many social service agencies in the area.

They haven't even delved into the mental health and trauma issues that affect many of their clients, something they would like to confront, King said.

If the grant funding is not renewed, Holcomb said they will seek support from other agencies. But that will mean a lag in services, keeping clients who are struggling day to day up in the air, she warned.

"Mi-APPP should spread further," Le'Nesha Thomas said. "There are a lot of people who need it."

Information is available at [www.bchdmi.org/community\\_health/miapp](http://www.bchdmi.org/community_health/miapp). Staff can be contacted at [parenting@bchdmi.org](mailto:parenting@bchdmi.org).

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