

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

Case Study: Milwaukee

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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In 2006, Milwaukee took note of a sad distinction: it had one of the highest rates of teen births in the nation, with 52 births per thousand teen-age girls¹. Civic leaders became even more troubled when they explored the data and consequences. Rates for black teens were five times higher than for whites. The economic cost to Milwaukee of births by unmarried teens in 2002 came to a staggering \$137 million over the lifetime of the children born. The child poverty rate (41 percent) ranked fourth in the nation, fueled in part by teen birth rates. Most disturbingly, interviews with service providers showed that “teen pregnancy” statistics were quite often a manifestation of sexual abuse, incest, dating violence and statutory rape, with 71 percent of all teen births fathered by men over the age of 20.

Civic leaders recognized teen pregnancy as closely linked to other issues Milwaukee was grappling with: education, crime and the cycle of poverty. Moved to action, United Way of Greater Milwaukee (UWGM) convened a group that same year. They called it the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Oversight Committee. Chaired by Elizabeth Brenner, the publisher of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*,

Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Milwaukee, WI
- **Problem:** One of the highest rates of teen births in nation
- **Results:** 31% decline in teen birth rate for 15 to 17 year olds since 2006
- **Differentiating Feature:** United Way of Greater Milwaukee is uniquely positioned to play the convener role. It has the trust of the community, the power (and political neutrality) to convene at the highest levels, and the independence to make a long-term commitment to a politicized issue.
- **Leaders / Lead Organization:** United Way of Greater Milwaukee (UWGM)
- **Philanthropic Support:** Collaborative Fund, which includes the Brico Fund; Faye McBeath Foundation; Greater Milwaukee Foundation; Johnson Controls, Inc. Foundation; Rockwell Automation Foundation; UWGM; Daniel M. Soref Charitable Trust; Aurora Health Care Foundation

¹Defined as live births to female teens in Milwaukee between the ages of 15 and 17

and Bevan Baker, the city's commissioner of health, it brought together a broad cross section of public officials, service providers, researchers and funders. What emerged was a highly specific roadmap for action and an ambitious goal: to reduce the teen birth rate by 46 percent by 2015, bringing Milwaukee in line with the national average and well below the average for a large city.

Progress has been encouraging. Preliminary data for 2010 shows a 31 percent decrease in the teen birth rate since 2006, with births dropping to 36 per thousand teenage girls¹. A cutting-edge public awareness campaign has ensured that virtually every Milwaukeean, both urban and suburban, is now aware of the issue. The greatest focus has been on teens, themselves. For example, in partnership with the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the collaborative has trained close to 1,000 teachers. This effort has dramatically increased the proportion of MPS' approximately 80,000 students who are receiving age-appropriate, science-based curriculum on sexuality. Meantime, United Way's continuing Healthy Girls programs have provided about 16,000 young people with additional education on the topics of teen pregnancy, sexual violence, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV prevention. Praise for the initiative has also come from the respected National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, which cited the collaborative's broad partnership, focus on evidence-based interventions and ambitious goal.

Yet, given the controversial nature of teen pregnancy, predictable challenges have emerged. UWGM's CEO Mary Lou Young says, "I still answer questions from donors almost every day on why we are tackling this issue. It is a constant effort to reinforce the message that teen pregnancy is a catalyst for poverty." Early on, though, UWGM made the decision that it would commit to the issue long term. While some donors withdrew their support, others have stepped forward so that overall support has increased.

Three key things have made the Milwaukee collaborative successful in reducing teen pregnancy rates:

Dedicated staff provides momentum: *dedicated capacity and appropriate structure*

Describing UWGM's role in the collaborative, Nicole Angresano, vice president of Community Impact, stated, "We conduct the orchestra." It does so by providing a full suite of administrative support that keeps things moving ahead. The oversight committee holds quarterly meetings open to the public, receiving input and advice for the effort. But the real work happens in four subcommittees that meet monthly. They focus on public awareness, sexual victimization, collaborative funding and the faith community. A UWGM staffer

is assigned to each of the five committees to coordinate across committees by maintaining and updating the roadmap and logic model, creating agendas, handling public relations and providing talking points. UWGM supports these activities in-kind out of its own full-time staff, supplementing with interns, fellows and volunteers when needed.

Respected, neutral leader: *effective leadership and governance*

UWGM was uniquely positioned to play the convener role—it had the trust of the community, the power (and political neutrality) to convene at the highest levels, and the independence to make a long-term commitment to an issue. While the UWGM convenes the group and staffs the collaborative, it does so with a light touch. As CEO Young is careful to point out: “We have publicly committed to getting this done, but we don’t own the agenda. The collaborative and the community own the agenda.” UWGM also ensures that proper credit goes to partner organizations, such as the Milwaukee Public Schools. The result is a collaborative focused on impact rather than on programs, funding or credit. In a very few cases, the collaborative has formalized decisions rules (for example, oversight committee cochairs have veto power over any new public awareness ad), but otherwise operates without bylaws or formalized roles, relying on a strong culture of trust among participants.

Comprehensive public awareness: *community members as partners and producers of impact*

In Milwaukee’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative, United Way of Greater Milwaukee saw clearly that teens needed multiple reinforcing messages to change their behavior. The initiative centers on direct education and counseling via public schools, nonprofits and the faith community. In addition, an innovative public awareness campaign by Serve Marketing changed the conversation among teens, their friends and parents. The campaign began with ads making the case that teen pregnancy impacted everyone in greater Milwaukee (even the suburbs) due to its economic cost. Subsequently, peer teens were engaged through a series of provocative ads, radio spots and even a fake movie premiere. The collaborative also reached out to parents, providing them with a “Let’s Talk toolkit” to help them talk about sexuality with their kids

SOURCES

- “Teen Pregnancy Prevention.” United Way of Greater Milwaukee: Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative. <http://www.unitedwaymilwaukee.org/TeenPregnancyPrevention.htm>. 2011.
- “Strong Babies Invade Milwaukee.” BVK News. December 2010. <http://www.bvk.com/289/289>.