

**Kristine Hazzard**

### Birth rate of teens is our issue

PITTSFIELD

**M**y job allows me many opportunities to speak with members of the community in various settings — workplace campaigns, public meetings, in various media, and on Berkshire United Way's monthly PCTV cable show "Community Matters." One of the issues I frequently talk about is Berkshire County's teen birth rate: In fact, I recently shared the data regarding this serious community issue in a conversation with more than 100 concerned citizens.

Between 1998 and 2007, the likelihood of teenage girls (ages 15 to 19) in Berkshire County giving birth increased 20.5 percent while the state rate in Massachusetts decreased 21.7 percent.

In 2008, there were 117 births to teens from 15 to 19 in Berkshire County. Fifty-one percent or 60 of those births were to Pittsfield teenagers. Adams, Dalton and North Adams also have teenage birth rates above the 2008 state rate.

If you're not the parent of school-aged children, you might not be concerned about these troubling statistics. I urge you to think again.

Teen parenthood is a leading reason why 26 percent of students in the U.S. drop out of school each year. In Massachusetts, this accounts for approximately 2,600 high school dropouts each year.

Six in 10 community college students who have a child after enrolling fail to complete their education — that's 65 percent higher than the rate for those who don't have children.

Consider also that in 2009, 34.5 percent of Berkshire County children age 5 or younger were living in poverty, a rate significantly higher than the 15.2 percent statewide.

We know education and employment are fundamental to strong families and communities. Without our collective efforts, we will continue to see poverty, substance abuse, and homelessness hurt our youth, erode our community and consume our tax dollars.

What can be done? Much of the groundwork has already been set.

Working with the Mass Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, the Berkshire County-based Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative — comprised of community members and practitioners in education, health care and social services — has identified evidence-based strategies for addressing teen pregnancy prevention. To understand local perceptions the Initiative surveyed more than 900 youth and adults throughout Berkshire County.

Both survey groups' greatest area of concern is the perceived lack of condom and contraceptive use. This bears out when you consider that 85 percent of youths and 43 percent of adults agree that it's

OK for teens to have sex with a steady boy/girlfriend and the reasons most frequently cited for getting pregnant are: unplanned, don't have condoms/ contraceptives in the moment or don't want to use them.

Survey respondents recommend specific actions:

- \* Access to comprehensive sexuality education in schools and through youth programs, parents and peer education — beyond a one-time "sex talk" — to truly helping youth navigate personal relationships.

- \* Access to condoms and other contraceptives for sexually active youth in locations youth frequent and feel safe, with hours accessible by youth.

- \* Ensuring youth perceive opportunity and hope for a bright future. Absent the motivation to delay sex and prevent pregnancy, young people remain at risk.

Sounds like a tall order in a tough economy with no new funds available. But by re-aligning and re-directing existing resources to each of these three areas, we can reduce teen pregnancy.

How can you help? Get involved with the Initiative and join one of the teams working on solutions. Visit [berkshireunited-way.org](http://berkshireunited-way.org) to learn more. Advocate for comprehensive health/sexuality education in our schools and health care access in our community. Easiest and perhaps most importantly, actively demonstrate your concern for youth you know by showing them they matter and have a bright future.

Kristine Hazzard is the president and CEO of Berkshire United Way and a founding member of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative.