



## Success Story: YMCA of Cumberland (Allegany County, Maryland)

### *Delaying Sexual Initiation Through Use of an Evidence-based Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program*

#### **Overview**

Allegany County is geographically isolated in the Appalachian Mountains of Western Maryland and is ranked as one of the unhealthiest counties in the state (23rd out of 24 counties).<sup>1</sup> The county has the third lowest household income in Maryland, with a median income that is less than half the state average.<sup>2</sup> Nearly one-quarter of youth under the age of 18 live in poverty<sup>1</sup> and more than half of the students in Allegany County Public Schools qualify for free or reduced lunch.<sup>3</sup> Loss of major manufacturing plants has left the citizens of Allegany County with an unemployment rate that hovers above 8%.<sup>4</sup>

In 2010, the teen birth rate for the United States was 34.3 births per 1,000 females aged 15-19.5 The teen birth rate for Allegany County was slightly higher than the national rate at 35 births per 1,000<sup>1</sup>; and significantly higher than the teen birth rate in Maryland at 27.2 births per 1,000.<sup>3,4</sup> Though high, the outlook would likely be bleaker still if not for the arduous work of community-based organizations, like the YMCA of Cumberland Maryland, to prevent teen pregnancy.

#### **Program Description**

With funding from the Office of Adolescent Health, the YMCA of Cumberland has partnered with the Allegany County Public Schools to launch a county-wide initiative to implement the Adult Identity Mentoring (Project AIM) program with all 7th grade students in the county. Project AIM is an evidence-based program for youth ages 11-14 that has been proven to delay sexual initiation.<sup>5</sup> The overall goal of the program is to reduce sexual risk behaviors among low-income youth by providing them with the motivation to make safe choices and to address deeper barriers to sexual risk prevention like hopelessness and poverty. Project AIM makes an impact by taking youth through a series of lessons to help them imagine a positive future and identify how current risk behaviors can be a barrier to a successful adulthood.

The YMCA implements Project AIM for 7th graders in all four of the public middle schools, one private school, and as an after-school program at the YMCA. The program is implemented with fidelity by trained male and female co-facilitators in classroom groups of approximately 20 students. Student participants are encouraged to explore their personal interests, social surroundings, and what they want to become as an adult. Youth envision themselves in a future career and connect current behavior



directly to possible success as an adult. Students develop business cards and resumes, complete a career interest inventory, and participate in job interviews. Youth practice skill-building around goal-setting, communication, and decision-making, and have the opportunity to think about their future in terms of milestones to accomplish goals and overcome potential obstacles they may encounter in life.

### **Program Impact**

During the 2011-2012 school year, nearly 500 7th grade students in the Allegany County Public Schools received Project AIM. Forty-four percent of the participants were female and 56% were male. Independent observations of the program indicated that nearly all sessions (97%) were implemented with fidelity and that the quality of the sessions was excellent. As a result of implementing the program with fidelity, it is expected that the students who received the program will be more likely to delay sexual initiation than they would have if they hadn't received the program; the result of the original evaluation of Project AIM.

Feedback from teachers and administrators has been overwhelmingly positive. Each teacher and each administrator had a favorite story to report on the impact of Project AIM on their students. Some noted attitude changes among specific students; others liked the messages in Project AIM so much that they found themselves frequently referring back to the messages during their regular lessons. One assistant principal pointed to a student in the hall who was still carrying his Project AIM portfolio four weeks following graduation from Project AIM. The assistant principal said that that particular student had been a frequent visitor to detention and had been addressed weekly for discipline problems. She added that she was pleased to report that she had not seen that student for disciplinary issues since the student started Project AIM. Another parent shared how impressed she was with the effect Project AIM had on her son's conversations with her. She explained that her son would typically provide little to no information when she asked him about his school day. But, during Project AIM, he excitedly initiated conversations with her usually prefacing his comments with, "Guess what we did in Project AIM today?" School personnel love it, parents love it, our facilitators love it, but most of all, the youth love it.

With funding from OAH, the YMCA of Cumberland Maryland and the Allegany County Public Schools will continue to partner to provide Project AIM to all 7th grade students in the county each year through the 2014-2015 school year. In addition, the YMCA of Cumberland Maryland has expanded the program to 7th and 8th grade students in neighboring Mineral County, West Virginia. With the expansion, approximately 750 students in Allegany County, MD and Mineral County, WV will receive Project AIM each year.



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<sup>1</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. (2012). [Available here](#).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census State and County Quickfacts. (2010). [Available here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing & Regulation. (2012). [Available here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ. (2012). Birth rates for U.S. teenagers reach historic lows for all age and ethnic groups. NCHS data brief, no 89. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. [Available here](#).

<sup>5</sup> Clark, L. F., Miller, K. S., Nagy, S. S., Avery, J., Roth, D. L., Liddon, N., & Mukherjee, S. (2005). Adult identity mentoring: Reducing sexual risk for African-American seventh grade students. *Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 37(4), 337e1-337e10.