

Governor's Council for Women and Girls
Health and Safety Subcommittee
December 5, 2022 - Meeting Minutes

Attendees: Deborah Poerio, Dr. Jennifer Hernandez, Shelby Pons, Tammy Sneed, Miriam Miller, Laura Morris (OHS), Anne Bonito, Jane Siegel, Valencia L. Bagby-Young, Megan Smith (CHA), Christine Jean-Louis, Yvette Young, Janet Alfano, Shelly Nolan, Ashley Starr-Frechette, Maryann Smith (recorder)

Meeting Started at 10:05 am

- I. Opening Remarks – Deborah Poerio - Welcome everyone. My pleasure to support CoWaG in their presentation of teens, their mental health and challenges. Our two speakers are going to be speaking on supports for pregnant and parenting teens:
- Shelby Pons has a master's in social work from University of Connecticut,
 - worked at the State Department for 25 years and is a state director and grant manager of multiple state and federally funded grants that support after school and teen parent programs,
 - Member of the CT School Family Community Partnership, responsible for implementation of fiscal policies and practices
 - Provides leadership and guidance to school districts and community-based organizations across the State of Connecticut
 - Jennifer Hernandez developed the family owned Richmond Center in 2000 where she oversees the office of early child parents as teachers in home-based parenting education programs
 - Works with DPH Reach Services and is a member of DPH Maternal Mortality Review Board
 - Through a grant with the Department of Education, Jennifer is involved in the specialized team service for teens
- II. Presentation by Shelby Pons & Jennifer Hernandez:
- Shelby Pons: This program started 11 years ago when Obama was in office. First teen funding available at the federal level.
 - Pair up pregnant or parenting teens in Connecticut
 - Able to provide funding to the six school districts in the state that have the highest teen pregnancy and dropout rates. Those are Hartford, New Britain, Waterbury Windham, New Haven, Bridgeport and the target population was between 250 and 300 students at all times
 - We lost funding for that about a year ago, no longer in state budget. State Dept of Education decided to allocate \$2.4 million of the ARPA funding to continue this important work.
 - Money distributed to the six districts to receive October 22 through August of 2024.
 - Approximately \$400,000 per district, with Windham getting less because their target population is smaller, \$5,000 per student including social service wrap around and wrap around for academic support and college success
 - School and community-based approach – support in multiple locations and ability, make population feel comfortable coming back to school
 - Goals: 1. improve health and social and educational outcomes for expectant and parenting teens; 2. Educate teens about services available to support their education through graduation, health, and parenting needs; 3. Promote healthy child development for children of expecting and parenting teens.
 - Added a community outreach, host community gatherings, encourage teens to navigate and enroll in school
 - Hope to pull more students that are missing in action because of post pandemic trauma
 - A-Team of professionals including nurse and social worker, home visitation part instrumental, nurturing family networks

- Home visiting model starts with prenatal and stays with child until kindergarten, co-parenting to include father
- Shelby Pons: Statewide partnerships with CT State Department of Education, Department of Social Services, Capitol Region Education Council, Dave Pectel from Cross Sector, CT Department of Public Health, and the Hispanic Health Council, The Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence, and Office of Early Childhood.
- Our teen population is 4 to 1 Black, 8 to 1 Hispanic.
- Community Partnerships (J. Hernandez) – priority now is to look at doula supports for our vulnerable population.
- Connecticut one of first to receive funding to identify teens not enrolled in school, research-based model, test and pilot it. This model picked up across country.
- RFPs include flex schooling, case management, referrals to health services, quality childcare, parenting and life skills education, fatherhood involvement and support services, family engagement, and links to higher education and workforce development.
- Fatherhood piece interesting, evolved over last 11 years. Now include any mother, father, does not matter the age as long as one of the two is pregnant or parenting teen. Partners for the rest of their lives. Engagement to navigate relationships, male role models, communicate effectively.
- Identify pandemic challenges – remote learning, teens taking care of other siblings create disconnect with their academic goals
- The idea that these students are graduating at a higher rate is evidence the program is doing well.
- Workforce development – Family Enrichment Center in New Britain started in 2000. 22 years later we've seen more students coming back to school and going to college. Example shared that one of our students completed her college degree and the intent is to have her serve on our team.
- Successful family planning – between 96 and 97% of our population postpone an additional pregnancy until after graduation or for when they want in life. Work on financial literacy training with them as well.
- Shelby Pons: Barriers – biggest barrier is funding
- Students identified by state number, SASID, challenge to access this data
- Jennifer Hernandez: since the pandemic, teens have moved a lot throughout the state, hard to keep track of them.
- Throughout pandemic, lower number of teen pregnancies, however, this past summer we've seen many more 14/15-year-olds coming in that have been part of this transient movement.
- Shelby Pons: another barrier is, they have the human right to a free and equitable education, just like any other student, but the schools are set up for non-pregnant and non-parenting students. The policies and the timing, flexible scheduling, the things that we know need to happen in order to serve this population, are not necessarily being considered in the in the schools
- We leave you with the call to action. We're looking for a more solid funding source, consistent and statewide. We're looking for data on pregnant and parenting students linked to the SASID so it could follow them when they when they move, and for school districts to be able to not lose these students if they if they happen to disengage from the schools. We need better policies around supporting flexible scheduling and education options that align with Title 9.
- QUESTIONS: Laura Morris: On one of your very first slides, you had a listing of all the staff, so the outreach workers, and perhaps maybe the home visitation caseworkers, what type of credentials do they have? I'm asking because we're doing a lot of work with community health workers throughout the state, and I'm wondering if some of those positions could be community health workers. We're working on a sustainability and reimbursement mechanism for community health workers over the next year or two. Shelby Pons: We no longer decide, its up to the districts who they hire and their credentials.

III. Deborah Poerio introduced our other speaker for today, Tammy Sneed. Tammy is the director of the Office of Human Trafficking Services at the Department of Children and Families and is director of Connecticut's Human Anti-Trafficking response team called Heart. I always thought trafficking applied more to immigrants being illegally brought into the country and was shocked to hear it was so prevalent in our U.S. teens. Tammy, thank you so much for presenting today.

Presentation by Tammy Sneed – Good Morning Everyone. My email is in the chat if you need to contact me.

- Two areas of focus – our priority has been sex trafficking and labor trafficking in our state. Sex trafficking involves a commercial sex act.
- When we're talking about children, we don't have to prove any force, fraud or coercion. But when we're talking about adults, we do have to.
- Any sex act being conducted for anything of value. If there are kids out there that are having sex for a place to sleep for meal, whatever it may be, they are a victim no matter what, whether or not there is a third party involved. That third party is called a trafficker
- Certain populations that are much higher risk to become victims of trafficking, and girls tend to be the highest percentage, national data, 30% being boys on average and girls being about 70%.
- Kids involved in child welfare have lengthy histories of abuse and neglect
- Low-income communities have had a lot of children out there involved in commercial sex to support their families. LGBTQ GNC T populations, our kids and adults be at higher risk not because they identify as LGBTQ GNC T, but because of the environmental factors, kids being ejected from their homes or their communities makes them more vulnerable
- Data is telling us that 70% of adults that are in the life were victims as children, so most often this starts at a very young age.
- With COVID in 2020, we had a 25% increase in referrals--about 241 new referrals to the department
- More difficult for our boys to come forward as victims, not just a girl's issue
- it is a racial justice issue, and this has been consistent for years both in Connecticut and across the country. Our children of color are far more often to be targeted by traffickers.
- Another challenge is our Asian population
- Many individuals are being missed because we don't speak their language, we don't offer good ways to interact and provide them the education
- The vast majority of child victims in our state are living at home at time of their victimization.
- Less than 9% of our cases are interfamilial, meaning less than 9% of our kids, their perpetrators are parent, guardian or trusted caregiver. Many parents do not know this is going on with their child.
- Data for this year--it's continuing and again tying it back into this COVID pandemic, kids that never have technology now have it. They had to get technology to go to school, kids that never had the Internet now have it. So, we are seeing a huge increase.
- Most of the time, trafficking starts via the Internet, kids being lured in online and extorted online, this is first category
- Second category--kids deciding to meet that person that they fell in love with online out in the community, and they're sexually assaulted.
- Third category is they meet that person outside in the community and they're a trafficker and they end up a victim of trafficking.
- COVID really has impacted this issue across the country, including adults as well
- The teen power and control wheel is important to understanding the control traffickers used to manipulate their victims. The wheel is made-up of subtle, continual behaviors over time that cause victims to question themselves and remain embedded in the life. Peer Pressures, isolation, gaslighting, coercion, and threats, emotional abuse.
- Why do victims stay and continue to be abused—threatened by traffickers who also threaten their families.

- Tying into main topic of teen pregnancy today, these trafficking victims force them to be bought for sex, sometimes up to 25 times per night. Victims have illegal abortions in some cases.
- January is human Trafficking Awareness Month
- Schools are supposed to be trained, all teachers, all faculty are supposed to be trained within six months of hire, under legislation. And then every three years. We have 400 trainers, please reach out

Deborah Poerio: thank you Tammy, overwhelming amount of information. Tammy is doing training on race and ethnicity and trafficking in January—here is the flyer: [Race, Racism, and Human Trafficking \(google.com\)](#)

Jennifer Hernandez: Thank you Tammy for bringing up the ACES Study. High scores are not an uncommon scenario.

QUESTION: Deborah Poerio: can the percentage of girls be broken down? Tammy Sneed: we're transforming our data system—but our current system couldn't add the trafficking data. Too difficult to extract manually. Also, we're missing pregnancy piece because it's not a data element, people are filling out right now, but hopefully in the long term with our new system.

QUESTION: Deborah Poerio: Are there any cultures or cultural impacts that are brought into increasing in a certain population, the number of children who are trafficking? Tammy Sneed: we know kids of color are disproportionately targeted. It's a fact that traffickers, both black men and white men are targeting black girls. and the reason for it is they thought they would get less time in prison.

ADDED: Tammy Sneed—Another fact that has come up recently, over the years we've had zero cases of forced marriage that has come to our attention in Connecticut. You can get married at the age of 16 as long as you have your parent and the judge's approval to do that since October of last year. So just over a year at this point, I've had six cases. So that's the first time ever. More coming out about this in the next couple of months.

IV. Closing Remarks – Deborah Poerio:

- Thank you to all of my speakers today that in informed us with great facts and challenged just us two calls for action in support of the teenage population. I so appreciate you attending this and presenting and to everybody out there.
- If there are any questions, please feel free to follow up with these experts and/or contact Miriam, Laura Morris, or myself and I look forward to our next conversation.

Meeting ended at 11:27 am. Next meeting of CoWaG Health and Safety Subcommittee is Monday, March 6, 2023.

Meeting Recording: [Governor's CoWaG Health & Safety Subcommittee \[not-secure\]-20221205_163324-Meeting Recording.mp4 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

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