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Community Members Talk Collaboration and Teen Pregnancy Prevention

Hartsville, SC— On April 6, 2016, Darlington County First Steps (DCFS) hosted a meeting at the Butler Heritage Foundation where many of Darlington County’s key community members joined together. Special guests from The Duke Endowment, The Weathers Group and the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy were also in attendance. Presentations and discussions were centered on community collaboration, teen pregnancy prevention and reproductive health in the area.

The meeting began with a welcome and introduction by Dr. Alvin Heatley, DCFS Board Chairman and Executive Director of the Butler Heritage Foundation, and presentations followed. Jon Flowers and Ashley Holman of DCFS gave an overview of DCFS’ Parents Are First program and shared information on the Dad Cave and the Diva Den.

Parents Are First (PAF) is a comprehensive program designed to mobilize community partners to enhance the availability and quality of services for young parents, ages 15-24, in Darlington County. The program focuses on both mothers and fathers and provides both direct and indirect services to program participants. PAF’s four components are academic achievement, pregnancy prevention, parenting, and fatherhood.

The Dad Cave is a safe environment for fathers to participate in group activities, receive peer support and assistance with child support issues. A highlight of the space is the pool table for fathers to relax and enjoy themselves through friendly competition and conversation. The Diva Den-supported by the Byerly Foundation- is similar to the Dad Cave but was designed with mothers in mind. Comfortable seating, vibrant colors, and diva décor make for a beautiful place for mothers to discover their “inner-diva” through self-empowerment activities.

Flowers and Holman also publicly introduced Access Condoms in Darlington County (AC/DC) to the audience. AC/DC addresses one of the S.C. Campaign’s four strategies created from their Executive Summary made possible by The Duke Endowment: to increase the number and utilization of teen friendly condom access points in the community. In this effort, DCFS has partnered with local barbershops, beauty salons and small businesses as access points that provide free condoms and sexual health literature.

Next to speak was Tamika Williams, program officer for The Duke Endowment (TDE). Williams gave a brief history of TDE and its inception, their four program areas, and why this work is



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important to their organization. TDE was established in North Carolina by James B. Duke in 1925 to help better the lives and situations of children, families, and communities. The four program areas are child care, health care, higher education, and rural church. Since 1925, TDE has expanded its reach and service to many outside of North Carolina.

Through working in the four program areas, a theme that most recently stood out to TDE was families reportedly becoming families before they were ready to. By seeing this trend, TDE began to research how they could provide a better choice for them and came across the S.C. Campaign and their strategies. "We want youth to remain abstinent but if that is not the case, then we will work together to support statewide agencies, community and school based strategies, and discover and work with teen friendly clinics" said Williams.

Sarah Kershner, Pee Dee Coordinator for the S.C. Campaign, presented who the S.C. Campaign is, their mission and shared some of the findings of Darlington County. The S.C. Campaign is located in Columbia, S.C. and their mission is to improve the health and economic well-being of individuals, communities, and the state of South Carolina by preventing teen pregnancy. To achieve its mission, the S.C. Campaign works with a variety of programs- public, private, school and community based in each region of the state.

Kershner stated, "We receive funding from the state, locally, and federally and give it back to the community and organizations that do the hands on work."

Kershner continued by highlighting perceptions and discussions that came out of teen focus groups conducted by DCFS. Results from the focus groups found that transportation to clinics and other services were challenging, the lack of teen friendly clinics, and that there is a perceived disparity in quality of services with health care providers. Kershner went on to say that one of the most divided dialogues happened in a parent focus group where strong opinions were given about whether or not parents should have conversations with their teens about love, sex, and relationships.

From all of the research and meetings held about reproductive health and teen pregnancy rates in Darlington County, TDE awarded funds to the S.C. Campaign and DCFS to have a significant impact in reducing rates of teen pregnancy and existing disparities in Darlington County. This will be accomplished by replicating evidence based teen pregnancy prevention programs including access to quality reproductive health services in Darlington County.



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Because this will be a community effort, Charles Weathers, founder and CEO of The Weathers Group, shared helpful tips and ways to build strong community alliances. "It is very important to understand the building of strong alliances" said Weathers. "We are all in the business of relationship building and should never stop building these alliances."

Weathers asked the audience why they do the work they do and some answered: To focus on adolescence and not discount them; to focus on growth inside and outside of the home; to better the community; and to make a difference in someone's life. Weathers encouraged everyone to keep working together by working with and through people, to be smarter when working together, and to bring your circle of influence with you because of the potential connections that can be made.

"Once we began to connect, the families move from targets to focus. When this happens, we can serve youth and families better together" said Weathers.

Last to present was Dana Becker, Community Mobilization Coordinator for the S.C. Campaign. Becker explained that community outreach, engagement, involvement and mobilization will be determinates of how this work will be extremely effective in the county. Becker continued saying, "We want all of you to support the work DCFS is doing by creating an action plan and then performing the action." Becker spoke about establishing a Community Action Team that would be comprised of adults and a Community Youth Team that would be comprised of young people. The goal for these groups is education. Teams would meet once a month to discuss the vision for the youth in the community, where resources are, and to strengthen relationships amongst each other and the ones served. Teams will be a reliable liaison between DCFS and the community.

DCFS Executive Director, Darnell McPherson, closed with words of gratitude for all guest and community members and lunch was provided by Bizzell's. If you are interested in joining the Community Action Team or Community Youth Team, please call the DCFS office at 843-857-3148. For more information on DCFS, visit their website at www.darlingtoncountyfirststeps.org.