

First Steps creates a community for parents, children to learn and grow

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In 2017, Darlington County First Steps is continuing its quest to reach and teach the whole family.

Patricia Sullivan, First Steps' Communications Specialist, said that the organization seeks to be on the frontline with parents.

"The children have to learn from someone and the first person they learn from is their parents," Sullivan said. "We try to reach them first and give them the tools and the skills they need to be the best parent they can be and continue to move forward in their future, to provide a good foundation for their children."

Brenda Ayers works with the Parents Are First Program, PAF for short. She said that her job includes pregnancy prevention education as well as instruction for those who are already parenting.

"(Our grant to fund this program) is actually a Pregnancy Assistance Fund grant, which is a federally funded grant that was given to the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy and to Children's Trust of South Carolina," Ayers said. "They applied for a federal grant, they pulled the money down and then they put it out for bids. Darlington County First Steps is one of four sites in the state that was funded."

Ayers said that there are four objectives for the PAF program.

- Educational Attainment
- Enhancing parenting skills
- Prevent repeat pregnancies
- Community Collaboration

"If they are in school we encourage them to stay in school and if they aren't we try to get them back in; if they have graduated, we try to gear them toward Tech or another college," Ayers said. "We want to enhance their parenting skills to ensure the well-being of their children."

Darlington County is working especially hard to prevent pregnancies and repeat pregnancies in teens.

"Darlington County has traditionally had a high rate of teen pregnancy," Ayers said. "At the time this grant was funded, we were 14th highest in the state for teen pregnancy and 5th highest for repeat pregnancy. So, the target groups for PAF are ages 15-24, pregnant and or parenting, mothers and fathers. One of the unique things about PAF is that it does have a fatherhood component. Most programs, traditionally, only work with mothers and children."

A 'Dad Cave' and a 'Diva Den' serve as spaces for young parents to meet with First Steps staff as well as a place for them to grow a community of people they can relate to.

Ashley Holman works with the mothers who come through the programs at First Steps. She said that the Diva Den is essential to the work that they are doing, as is the childcare center located across the hall.

“We are often the first place that these young mothers come where they are not expected to have their children in the sessions; at WIC, and places like that, they have to have their kids with them,” Holman said. “A lot of times we are the first people who are keeping their kids. We keep the Diva Den’s door open and they know their children’s cry. They can go and check on them and see what is going on.”

Computers are available in the den for class work as well as resume building. Ayers said that both the Diva Den and the Dad Cave have an open door policy.

“Both of them have scheduled events but there are a lot of times during the week where the moms or dads just drop in,” Ayers said.

“It really is about building those relationships,” Holman added.

In situations where there is not a lot of family support, Holman said, First Steps helps bridge the gap.

“We focus a lot on peer-support and peer-mentoring because they are with people who are going through the same things,” Holman said. “Their journey and their story might be a little bit different but they are experiencing the same challenges or the same successes many times. It is creating a peer group for them because a lot of them are isolated in raising their children.”

Program-wide events also invite extended family members who are involved to be a part of the learning and growing.

“We work so much with inter-generational households,” Holman said. “It can be a blessing and also a challenge. All of the families know that they can call us and talk any time. We are a place they can come that is not emotionally charged.”