

First Steps plans to add resource locations

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During the July meeting of Darlington City Council, several community agencies spoke to council about the programs that they offer. One of those agencies was Darlington County First Steps. Patricia Sullivan, Communications Specialist for First Steps, talked to council about the need for increased contraceptive education in Darlington.

“The mission of First Steps is to provide programs, services and information to strengthen the families and communities in Darlington County; our vision is strong families and healthy communities,” Sullivan said.

“Everything we do is to see that vision come to fruition. We focus on family strengthening so children live in thriving environments, school transitioning, and reproductive health education. For our youth we have a youth leadership team where we work with adolescents on contraceptive care and educational counseling, which is birth control counseling for parents who are interested in that option.”

Speaking in tandem with Sullivan was Tiffany Byrd of the Choose Well SC program. She spoke about the importance of contraception being available to everyone.

“Our vision is to see a South Carolina where there is equitable access to all methods of birth control without a person receiving coercion, judgment or stigma,” Byrd said. “What that means is that we want to see a South Carolina where women, men and their families are not forced to use any particular method of birth control but have access to whatever form they desire and are not judged for their choice.”

Byrd said that she wanted council members to understand how the state is impacted by unintended pregnancies.

“You are probably wondering, why this issue, is it really a problem, is it important,” Byrd said. “Well, in South Carolina, over half of all pregnancies are unintended. Fifty-four percent of women reported themselves that their last pregnancy was an unintended pregnancy; that means that it was either mistimed, I’m happy but unprepared, it was unplanned or it was unwanted. There is also a significant financial cost to the state for unintended pregnancies. South Carolina pays about 79 percent of all unintended births, which totals about \$84 million a year.”

Byrd said that by offering contraceptives, Choose Well hopes to limit unintended pregnancies, which are hard on both mom and baby.

“Babies born from unintended pregnancies are more likely to be of low birth weight, more likely to have longer hospital stays and are more likely to be sent home with equipment to help them with growth and development,” Byrd said. “These babies are also less likely to be breastfed and we all know that breastmilk is the healthiest for growth and development. Moms who experience an unintended pregnancy are less likely to have had prenatal care, which can mean she is not in her healthiest state for pregnancy. This has been associated with an increased risk in complications during and after labor.”

Sullivan said that they were speaking to council because they are hoping to expand their AC/DC (Access Condoms in Darlington County) Program by working with the recreation department.

“I know when people hear the word condoms it is kind of alarming but we can’t just sweep it under the rug like it is not a necessity for our communities,” Sullivan said.

“I feel like we have a great opportunity to work with the Darlington Recreation Department to devise a plan that is comfortable for everyone but very beneficial for the people who actually need our service.”

Several council members expressed concern that young children would be exposed, and potentially influenced, by the condoms and information brochures. Sullivan said that they would be placed in discrete locations.

“Abstinence is always the first line of communication,” Sullivan said. “But things do happen. If they do happen, we want to be sure that they are prepared and have the resources that they need.”

Councilwoman Carolyn Bruce said that from her experience this is a necessary program.

“I can tell you from my experience working in the Darlington County School District, there are kids...as early as ten and twelve who engage in sex now,” Bruce said. “These kids know what’s going on. I think it would be beneficial in both locations of our recreation department.”

First Steps staff will be talking with Darlington Recreation Department staff to determine what the best place to put their resources would be.