

## Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth Podcast Series

### **Episode: Leveraging Social Media**

[John Bollenbacher:] Welcome to Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth, a podcast series by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This series is produced by FYSB's Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, as part of The Exchange.

I'm John Bollenbacher, a producer for The Exchange. Here in the podcast we talk with people implementing programs that prevent teen pregnancy and help prepare teens for adulthood. While overall teen birth rates are decreasing, we're not done yet. Teen births remain high among vulnerable youth.

Today we're joined by Ginger Harris from Tennessee, who works with Assist Youth, specifically with youth who have aged out of foster care, which is a really fascinating subject, so thanks for joining us and tell us a little bit about your program.

[Ginger Harris:] When the young people aged out of foster care, a lot of them exit into very negative situations. A lot of times they may end up homeless, or they just feel like they have no support from adults in their lives. And so, it can be a very, very tough situation for a lot of the young people that we deal with, but, thankfully, we have services that do support young people if they decide to pursue a postsecondary education, and so we offer funds that can assist them with housing, and school.

[John Bollenbacher:] We've talked with a number of people that work with this population—children in foster care, in and out of foster care, and I can only imagine with the turbulent life they've had, that they don't get a lot of good information around pregnancy and pregnancy prevention. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[Ginger Harris:] There is a lot of information that the young people that we work with don't know. And it's very alarming, but that's why I'm thankful that we have programs that can educate our young people and give them the tools that they need to function, you know, in their adult lives. So it's very helpful to have the knowledge to be able to convey to our young people, because they definitely need it.

[John Bollenbacher:] Can you give us some more specifics around the programs that you're running?

[Ginger Harris:] Yes. We have the Sisters Program, which is an awesome program for our young ladies. And, just working with that program, I can see the impact that it has on the young ladies, and how engaged they are during the process. They feel that they get a lot of information that they never learned while they were in foster care, so it's very rewarding to be able to teach them and give them the tools that they need to be successful, and to be equipped with the knowledge if they ever find themselves in a situation. They have responded very well to the program, we are seeing an increase in participation, so that's very, very good news for us.

[John Bollenbacher:] So what kinds of things happen in the Sisters Program?

[Ginger Harris:] Oh, we are teaching safe sex education, it's pregnancy prevention, and we also do a lot of self-esteem building activities, so we cover a lot of information in a short period of time. But they really seem to be responding well to it.

[John Bollenbacher:] Outside of the sex education, what other adult preparation topics are you covering?

[Ginger Harris:] We have our Opportunity Passport program, and that's a financial literacy program that we offer to our young adults. And it's a wonderful program, it teaches our young people lots of great tools about budgeting, it covers an array of information that they need to become successful members of society. I mean, it talks about how to purchase a car, things to look for when you do that. It talks about what to look for when you want to lease your first apartment or home. So, it just covers all of these things that are just great for our young people to know once they start to get out there and they begin their lives as a successful young adult. We cover things about employment, and we also help connect them to different internships, or we help them gain employment. The great thing about the Opportunity Passport is they get an incentive for participating. And then we also help them set up a checking and savings account, so it gets them on the right track, and they seem to love the program and they respond very well to it.

[John Bollenbacher:] For those that don't work in this field, they must look at this and think, this is just so far and above and beyond regular pregnancy prevention...

[Ginger Harris:] Yes, it goes beyond it, and we've actually recently expanded the Sisters Program, and this actually occurred in June, to all of the Jim Casey Resource Centers in Tennessee. And these resource centers are beginning the classes across the state, and they're also connecting youth to the Opportunity Passport program.

[John Bollenbacher:] Can you give us a little story about how hard it is to get these above-and-beyond programs off the ground? I mean, is it something that most people can be doing, should be doing, or something that you need to find the right partners? Give us a little bit of the sense of the difficulty.

[Ginger Harris:] I think they just need to find the right partners. I mean, it's a challenge motivating the young people to want to participate in the programs, so you really have to emphasize the great information that the programs offer. I think it has to attract the young people in a way where they can see the benefit from the programs. You have to make it useful to them. So that can be hard, because sometimes the numbers can go up, and down. You'll see a big group, and you'll see great attendance in the beginning, and sometimes that will, you know, be, that will decrease, but you can't let that discourage you, because you know that what you're offering is great, and is very beneficial to the young people.

[John Bollenbacher:] Because the population you work with has been so transient, you can understand why the numbers go up and down, and it's hard to get some consistency. How do you face that challenge in your programs?

[Ginger Harris:] The most important thing that we have to remember to do is to build that relationship. We built a rapport with that young person. And we let them know that, you know, they can always come back, they can always communicate with us, and if they need anything, we're there to support them. It's really establishing that relationship in the beginning, building that rapport. Building that trust.

Because if they trust you, they know that they can come back to you. I tried to use creative ways to keep in contact with them, so, with my young people I text. I just learned to really communicate with them through text, because I see that that's the most efficient way. Also with social media, with things like Facebook and Instagram, I try to make sure that I post lots of updates about our programs, and what we have going on, because that's a great way that they can see that, and then they spread the word.

[John Bollenbacher:] You're the first one in our podcast who has brought up social media, which is interesting because you think with the younger population it would be a no-brainer. And, I think not a lot of people are using it, or using it well. Can you talk about some of your strategies and how you keep it up and going and consistent?

[Ginger Harris:] I pretty much run our Facebook pages. I have a Like page where anyone can like that page, adults, you know, staff members, young adults, they can like that page and get the information that they need. I make sure that I at least one to two times per week post an update, to keep it fresh on their minds so they don't forget. It's a very effective way to get information out about a program, a business, it's effective. Even if people don't comment or "like" it, they see it, and they can spread the word. I also have another page where people have to actually request to be my friend, and on that page I post other things that are specific to the programs, like I can take pictures of the Opportunity Passport class, or the Sisters Program. I don't show faces of our youth because I still try to protect confidentiality, but I'll take pictures just so people can actually see what we're doing. A lot of times I'll just send a friend request to our young people. I'm going to pop up in their news feed, and I just want to keep it fresh on their minds, I try to add the pictures, because instead of just making a status update with just words, let's see something visual, so I do like the pic collage, and then I'll put the Opportunity Passport or Sisters Program on the side just so they can get a visual. I try to really emphasize the incentives that we offer, because I know that that attracts them a lot. I always put phone numbers, so that way when they see it, they call me. And I've actually gotten some feedback from just managing the Facebook page, so I'm excited. And it's been effective, and I think it's great.

[John Bollenbacher:] Yeah, and I think that social media, for a lot of people, is really intimidating. Can you talk a little bit about how much effort you find it takes, and how much time you have to put into it to kind of keep this nice social media conversation going?

[Ginger Harris:] I don't think it takes up too much time, because I can do it on my mobile phone. If I'm out, working in the field, I can just update my status, or post a picture, I mean, I'm able to do it when I'm on the go. Which is great, because our young people are on the go, and I need to try to grab their attention the best way I can, even if it's just something like, "Hey, don't forget about Opportunity Passport, sign up today." Just something that will keep it fresh on their mind so they don't forget. Because if you let it linger too long and you don't post anything, they're going to forget, and they're not going to respond. Since young people like to text, I created a group, and we communicate back and forth on this app called Group Me, and, you know, instead of having to call to remind them about a meeting, I'll just send a text, "Hey Group, don't forget about our meeting on Wednesday." And they respond very well to that, because they don't have to call me, they don't have to text me, they could just do it in this app and then they're all communicating with each other, so it helps them build rapport with one another. I've found that that's effective. And it just gives them a creative way to really stay engaged with the group, and they encourage and motivate each other.

[John Bollenbacher:] Do you have a particular strategy when you're working with other groups around social media?

[Ginger Harris:] I just listen to what they want, and because I know that if I listen to what they want, then they're going to bring other people and then we're going to get more young people that are participating in the programs.

[John Bollenbacher:] So, there is a little bit of a disconnect going on with information around pregnancy rates. If you look at it in general, they seem like they're going way down, and some people might think, "Okay, job well done, we don't need to focus on this so much anymore." But you work with a very specific population, a very vulnerable population, where the numbers are pretty different. Can you talk a little bit about that disconnect?

[Ginger Harris:] I think the public, they have a perception of young adults that have been in foster care. They easily label them, and I think that's not the right thing to do. They want to feel normal. When I talk to them, and I ask them, what is it that you want? They just want to feel normal. They don't want to be labeled as number, or labeled as, "Oh, you're the kid that was in foster care." They want to feel normalcy just like the next young person that had what they would call a normal life. They want to have the same opportunities and they need that support. One thing that I've found, they really want that connected, caring adult in their life. They want somebody that they can just call and say, "Hey, you know what, can I just come over for dinner?" Things like that. It's just the simple things. Because of what the public may see in the news, they have this perception that, you know what, all of them, "You must have been in a group home," or, you know, "You had issues, and you just..." And they don't, they don't want people to see them like that. They just want to get the tools that they need to be able to live a productive life. A lot of the issues that they have, it's just the result of unfortunate circumstances that they faced in their past, and so, I think they want people to give them a chance, and they want, you know, people to know that they can do it, and they can be successful just like the next person.

[John Bollenbacher:] And do you think there is something specific around their situation that contributes to these unplanned pregnancies?

[Ginger Harris:] A lot of them just have still have low self-esteem. A lot of them have had negative experiences with adults in their life, and so I think it's easier, or they're more susceptible to clinging to unhealthy and toxic relationships, which put them at risk for things like unwanted pregnancies. And, I just think that there's a lot of information that they just don't know. Coming out of foster care, maybe they didn't get the tools that they needed while they were there, they may have had multiple moves and so they just weren't stable long enough to get everything that they needed, but I do see a lot of them clinging to relationships that are unhealthy, and they may need help getting out of that. And that's one thing that we cover in the Sisters Program, we talk about unhealthy relationships and things that you can do to change that. We talk about, even friendships, you know, healthy versus unhealthy friendships. They really get a lot out of that particular part of the curriculum.

[John Bollenbacher:] So looking forward, what do you want to see happen in this particular field with this kind of population? What is your ideal path forward with this kind of work?

[Ginger Harris:] I would like to see more support for the program. I would like to see more case managers in the field spreading the word about what these programs can offer to young adults and

young people, because we start a lot of these programs, you know, at age 16, and the lot of these young people may still be in foster care, well they are still in foster care, and, I want to see them supported. I just want to hear more success stories, I think we can have a lot of success stories as a result of the programs that we offer. We have to keep getting the word out there, and being creative about the way we reach out to our young people. And I think that we have to build that same momentum with our people that work in the field, our case managers and other frontline staff.

[John Bollenbacher:] I know you've worked with a lot of youth, and you've had a lot of success, are there any particular success stories that you come back to think about?

[Ginger Harris:] Well, there was a young man that we served through our Opportunity Passport program. And he was in foster care for about two years, and he just had a lot of circumstances that really caused people to think that he wasn't going to succeed, he wasn't going to do anything. But due to the overwhelming support he received through Opportunity Passport and just our Resource Center period, he was able to succeed and graduate from high school. He was offered a full scholarship to the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff, he will be attending UAPB in the fall. He is one of our most awesome success stories, because he defied all the odds. He was able to overcome all the obstacles that were placed in his life. So we are so proud of him, and just to see him start from a place where he was uncertain about his future, to now, he is going to attend college on a full scholarship. I mean, it's just amazing to see his transformation. So, I mean, he is one of the many success stories that we have, but he really stands out.

[John Bollenbacher:] Do you think there was any one particular thing that he grabbed onto or contributed to his success?

[Ginger Harris:] I think it was just the support. He had people there that believed in him, and encouraged him the entire way. I mean, he was able to build his confidence. And so, I think now he knows that he can do anything that he puts his mind to, because he had that support from all the adults at the Resource Center. And he met some great people, you know, his peers, they supported him as well, so I think he just had a great experience overall, and it really helped him. We're just proud of him. We are.

[John Bollenbacher:] Well thank you, Ginger, for joining us, this has been a fascinating conversation, and I want to thank our audience for listening to this Family and Youth Services broadcast. Please check out all of our other videos and podcasts on our website.

Thank you for tuning in. As you heard, our work isn't done and it will take more leaders like Ginger Harris to prep teens for the future.

Be encouraged, and get connected, at The Exchange. Go to [teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov](https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov).

This podcast series is produced by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. FYSB is committed to a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals, and families can live healthy, productive, and violence-free lives.