

Children's statistics improving

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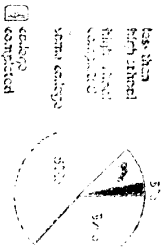
Conditions for Jefferson County's children are far from the best in the state, but in many areas, they are improving, according to a report issued by Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit, nonpartisan child advocacy group.

The group recently released its annual report, which shows that the county had high rates for teen pregnancy, infant mortality, childhood poverty, and juvenile arrests, among other factors in the status report.

"Unfortunately, we are acutely aware of these statistics and we actually benchmark some of our standards against these statistics," said Mike Morgan, Jefferson County administrator.

For many years, the county has held the unwanted title of highest rate of teen pregnancies in the state. With a variety of efforts, including the STARS program (Students Today Aren't Ready for Sex), the Health and Human Services Family Planning Program, and

Mothers' education Educational attainment of women who gave birth in 2002.



The Teen Parent Program at Madras High School, the county and school district are working together to bring down the county rate.

Although there were 19 pregnancies in the county in 2002, that represents a significant improvement over the previous year when there were 26. Those figures translate into a rate of 41.3 pregnancies per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17 for 2002, and 64.5 per 1,000 for the previous year. The report shows a rate of 27.6 per 1,000 for the state for the most recent year.

Patty Wilson, the coordinator for the STARS program is pleased to see the rate declining. "I think we've done some good work in the county and it will continue to go down," she said.

Through the STARS program, about 22 teen leaders from the high school are recruited each year and trained to teach younger kids the negative consequences of early sexual involvement. The teen leaders take the curriculum to all sixth grade classes in the county.

Cheryl Tom, administrative supervisor at the Health and Human Services Department, credits STARS with helping to reduce the teen pregnancy rate.

"Everybody is pleased about it," said Tom. "We're thinking a lot of it has to do with the STARS program."

Besides the high rate of teen pregnancies, the county had the worst statistics in the state for the educational level of the women who gave birth in 2002. Only 12 percent of babies were born to mothers who had attended or completed college,

while 88 percent were born to mothers with a high school education or less.

A total of 31 percent of households with children have a single parent, but 91 percent of children live in households with at least one parent working.

Over half the children in the county live in families at or near the poverty level — a rate that is 15 percent higher than in the state as a whole.

Jefferson County has 22 percent of its children living at the Federal Poverty Level — with an income of \$18,400 for a family of four, and 30 percent near poverty, with family income of less than \$36,800.

Out of Jefferson County's population of 19,850, nearly 30 percent are children, compared to a statewide figure of 24.8 percent children.

The county's youngest residents are dying at a rate that is several times the state average. According to the report, the county has an infant mortality rate of 22.7 per 1,000 live births, in contrast to the state's

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