

## **CREATING HOPE IN A TOUGH WORLD: UTILIZING INTERVIEWS AS CASE STUDIES TO EVALUATE A PROGRAM DESIGNED TO HELP HOMELESS TEEN MOTHERS**

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### **Abstract**

*An evaluation of a homeless teen mother program was conducted using in-depth interviews with four participants two years after their involvement in a program designed to help them become self-sufficient. Explanations were presented as to why the teens became homeless, how they attempted to cope with their homelessness and how the program helped them to achieve short-term goals. Seven major themes were identified as to why the program was initially helpful as well as why the teens chose to terminate their involvement in the program. Ultimately, the program director served as both a role model and lifeline for the teens.*

### **Problem Statement**

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program has enabled states to implement a broad array of programs to serve homeless pregnant and teen parents. A number of innovative experiments and programs have been created to help homeless teens mothers across the U.S. However, because this population is one of the most difficult to locate and research, little is currently known about the long-term success of programs designed to assist homeless teen mothers. The central purpose of this analysis was to ascertain whether such a program met its goals and objectives in helping locate stable housing, apply for public assistance, reunite with family, enroll in GED classes, find employment, gain job skills, find social support in the community, learn about birth control options, obtain drug or mental health counseling if needed, and to learn to set short-term goals.

In a large Midwest university town, homeless shelters for youth were steadily encountering pregnant homeless teens and/or mothers. A program, New Beginnings (pseudonym), was piloted after it had become apparent that homeless pregnant teens and homeless teen mothers were being underserved in that community. The mission of the program centered upon reuniting the homeless pregnant teen and/or mother with their family of origin, if possible. However, the goals of the program primarily focused on safety, shelter, medical care, education, and locating support systems. Two years after the program was implemented, twelve hours of in-depth interviews were conducted with four former participants to explore whether New Beginnings met any of its goals and objectives. By asking a broad variety of questions, it was possible to uncover invaluable information that program funders and administrators may have neglected to address.

### **Literature Review**

In the past twenty years, increasing amounts of research and attention has been dedicated to homeless women with children, the largest group of homeless families. (Meadows-Oliver, Sadler, Swartz and Ryan-Krause, 2007). However, pregnant or homeless teens have been neglected in the literature. Little is known about how homeless teen mothers view themselves, why they finally reach out for help, and if efforts to help them are successful (Meadows-Oliver, 2005).

Approximately 500,000 teens give birth every year. Of those teen mothers, approximately 20% or one-fifth are second or repeat births to teen mothers (Ventura, Martin, Curtin, Matthews and Park, 2000). In an ethnographic study of homeless women, Rivera (2003) acknowledged that the majority who attended high school eventually dropped out because of being pregnant and could not return due to family problems or a lack of childcare. In response to an increase in teenage pregnancy rates among the homeless population, the Institute for Children and Poverty (2003) surveyed 337 homeless women residing in New York City and described the following profile of homeless teen mothers:

- 50% had a previous abortion
- 37% did not know where to get birth control
- 42% did not know how to use birth control
- 31% had never been employed
- 64% had children with multiple fathers
- 41% did not know they were pregnant until second trimester
- 53 % were the product of adolescent childbearing

Stavsky (1990) interviewed homeless teens and described how one young mother of two spoke of her relationship with her own mother

*I called up my mother whom I hadn't spoken to in awhile. I told her that I wanted to kill myself. Her only response was, if you kill yourself, you better take your kids with you, 'cause I'm sure as hell not gonna take care of them.*

Meadows-Oliver (2003) and Thrasher and Mowbray's (1995) ethnographic interviews with homeless mothers living in shelters unearthed themes including a shelter is the last resort; finding housing is difficult and help comes from many people, and the women lived with many different family members and friends before moving into shelters.

Meadows-Oliver (2003) searched for significant themes regarding homeless mothers in a meta-synthesis of eighteen qualitative studies and established such commonalities as general feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, frustration, stress, loss of control over lives and depression. Strategies for improving their situations were going back to school, getting off public assistance, obtaining GED and finding a permanent place to live. Rivera (2003) found that length of time enrolled in adult education programs increases self-esteem of homeless women. However, among homeless women who enroll in adult literacy education, attrition rates are high due to pressure to enroll in welfare to work programs for the fear of if they did not, they might lose their welfare benefits, struggles with childcare, and other obstacles such as health problems, learning disabilities, lack of transportation and little encouragements from family and friends to return to school.

### **Methodology**

Three African American teen mothers and one Caucasian teen were located and interviewed as part of a non-random sample of former New Beginnings participants. In-depth interviews were held two years following their involvement in the program. Originally, the program had 12 original clients (of which ten were African American and two were Caucasian); seven of who could not be located, while one other was not interested in participating in such a study.

### **Interview Questions**

In addition to routine questions addressing her life situations that led to her homelessness, the following questions and issues were explored:

- What lead to the participant's enrollment in the program?
- What were the effects of the program on the participant both during and after her enrollment?
- Did the program have any lasting and measurable effects on the participant?
- Where was she currently living?
- What has been her record of employment since her enrollment in the program?
- Did she complete her GED or high school education?
- Had she had another child or pregnancy since her enrollment in the program?
- What led to her decision to terminate her participation in the program?
- Did the program help her? How?
- What was her life like before participating in the program? Where did she live?
- What were her main thoughts and feelings about the program and its management?

### **Profiles of Respondents and Settings of the Interviews**

#### **Respondent 1: Christine (pseudonym)**

At the time of her first interview, Christine, an African American 18 year-old had two children who were twenty-one months and three-weeks old. She had been expelled from her high school for setting fire to another girl's hair and sent to a boot camp. While enrolled at the boot camp, she became pregnant and was sent home. However, her father would not allow her into his house unless she agreed to have an abortion. Upon her refusal to abort her child, Christine was homeless. At that time, she enrolled in New Beginnings with the hopes of returning to her parent's home and finishing high school. Christine described her home life as very unstable and was markedly depressed. She stated that she had attempted suicide several times as a means to ending her pain and suffering. Her relationship with her own father was described as troubled and distant as he was disabled and spent most of his time fishing. She claimed that both of her children's fathers were addicted to drugs. Christine explained that she did not know why she got pregnant, other than she liked to be loved by a man. At the time of the interview, Christine had returned to her parent's home as was struggling with the realization of having two children with no high school diploma and no job. Two interviews were held with Christine with the first in her parent's home in a deteriorated and crime-ridden neighborhood. The second was held at a local library, a setting that temporarily removed her from her environment.

**Respondent 2: Rebecca (pseudonym)**

Rebecca, 19, a year-old African American female, participated in New Beginnings two years prior to the interview. She stated that she originally became homeless due to her volatile relationship with her mother. When Rebecca was six months pregnant, her mother asked her to leave. Rebecca's mother and siblings lived in a tiny apartment with a landlord who threatened to have the whole family evicted if another person or child would move into the apartment. Before she had her baby, Rebecca stated that she frequently used drugs and went to nightclubs, bars and parties. By not gaining much weight, she attempted to conceal her pregnancy as long as she possibly could. Furthermore, she mentioned that she did not know the identity of her baby's father. She had numerous sexual encounters and although she had birth control methods available to her, she elected not to use them. At the time of the interview, Rebecca had a two year-old son who did not live with her. Rebecca lived in an apartment she shares with friends, is not employed, has not graduated from high school or completed GED requirements and is collecting public assistance.

The interviews with Rebecca were held at the home of her cousin in a public housing section of the city in which she lived. The setting was clearly depressing and disturbing for there were more people living in the small apartment than could be counted. The home was filled with a haze of cigarette smoke and with sounds of both extremely loud noises from music and television. The front door appeared to be a revolving door with young males, as well as children of all ages.

**Respondent 3: Angela (pseudonym)**

Angela, an African American was twenty years old at the time of the interviews. She enrolled in the program when she was 18, homeless and pregnant. Angela stated that her mother forcibly pushed her out of her family home after learning of her pregnancy. She then found herself with no place to live, no identification, and no money. After hitchhiking to the city where her boyfriend lived, she appeared on his mother's doorstep but was turned away for the home was already overcrowded; there was no room for Angela and her baby. At the time of the interviews, she had two children and lived in the same housing unit that she moved into when she enrolled in New Beginnings. She was not employed and was collecting public assistance. Angela exclaimed that her relationship with her children's father had deteriorated and he had since impregnated another teen.

The first interview with Angela was held in the living room of her apartment. The room was decorated with furnishings from the local Salvation Army. Due to the potential dangerousness of her neighborhood, the follow-up interview was held at a small restaurant.

**Respondent 4: Missy (pseudonym)**

Missy, a Caucasian, 17 year-old had a 30 month-old daughter at the time of the interviews. Missy explained that her daughter was put into foster care several months after she had dropped out of New Beginnings. The child was removed from Missy's care because of prostitution incident in which Missy took her baby on a 'call' with her. She had agreed to have sex with an older truck driver in exchange for a pack of cigarettes. The baby was left in a run down car outside a motel room and a stranger called the police. When the baby was taken into foster care, she was malnourished, underweight and dirty.

Missy was living in a trailer with an older man when she was located for the interview. She had come to the program two years prior after her mother asked Missy and her baby to move out. Missy had four younger siblings and Missy's mother said she couldn't afford to have Missy, then 15, or her baby live with her. Missy's father had been imprisoned for molesting her and several of her siblings when she was nine. Before becoming pregnant, Missy had been a frequent guest at a local homeless teen shelter until she was barred from the premises for keeping marijuana in her room. She was also on probation for shoplifting.

**Findings**

Seven predominant themes emerged from the interview data:

1. Participation in the program was the last resort.
2. The program had an immediate life-saving effect on the teens.
3. The goals of the program were initially achieved through the development of trust by New Beginnings' program director.
4. The participants became dependent on New Beginnings' program director.
5. The short-term strides that the teens made eroded with a change in New Beginnings' management.
6. Positive effects for the program disintegrated because the bond of trust was lost with a change in New Beginnings' management.
7. Without support from the program, the teens were left with chronic feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and reverted to old thoughts and behavior patterns.

## Participation as the Last Resort

Participation in New Beginnings resulted from tough realizations surrounding their lifestyles. They had no where to turn and no where to go:

*I think I would have died if it hadn't been for the program or I might have had to sell my body or something. I sure didn't wanna do that. I found myself in a strange town, with nothing but some clothes in a big black garbage bag. No one would help me. I couldn't go home. I was so scared and tired. The baby's father couldn't help me. I ended up on his Momma's doorstep and she told me too many people lived with her. I found out that that house got busted for drugs a couple days later and the cops even put a gun to a little boy's head.*

--Angela

*The day my mom made me get out, I took my daughter to the homeless shelter for teens, but they wouldn't let me stay there anyway because I had some pot there in my room the last time I was there. Anyways, my baby couldn't stay there with me anyway if I could have stayed there. No babies. I stayed all night in a park in this little fort thing that kids played in during the day. I kept my daughter in there. I got busted out though. A cop came somehow I ended up in the program. It was that or foster care for me without my kid. She would've gone somewhere else.*

--Missy

Three of the teens, except for Missy, were forced to leave their parent's homes after the discovery of their pregnancies. Missy's mother could not afford to care for Missy or her infant. One commonality with the teens were that they lived very unstable lifestyles by bouncing from relatives' homes and the homes and apartments of friends. They came to the program when they realized that they had no dependable or reliable living arrangement. Additionally, they seemed to feel that they had burned bridges among friends and family and realized there was nowhere else to turn.

*I bounced around from friend to friend until I didn't get along with them anymore. I felt really nervous and afraid that they were mad at me for staying with them. Then I hitchhiked to my baby's daddy's town a couple of hours away.*

--Angela

The women had tough realizations that they had no place to go and no one to take care of them; they were jobless and were unable to attend school. Ultimately, they were homeless and in desperate need of help. After exhausting all options for survival, the teens' contact with New Beginnings was their last resort for they were poverty-stricken and pregnant. In Missy's case, she had a small baby. New Beginnings seemed to be their only alternative, one that did have life-saving effects on them.

*I was pregnant and had nowhere to go. My momma kicked me out of her house when she found out I was pregnant. I didn't have a place to live. I didn't not even have any identification. My Momma got real mad at me and told me that I could not live with her anymore. Momma wanted me to be somebody. So when she found out I was pregnant, she grabbed my arm and told me to pack my bags. I threw some stuff in a black garbage bag and hit the road. I couldn't get any help, not from anybody. I thought I was gonna die or something. So I was carryin' all my stuff in a garbage bag. I had nothing, no one.*

--Angela

*When my Momma found out about me bein' pregnant she blew and told me that I couldn't stay with her anymore. My grandmother let me stay with her a few nights a week. She had so many of my other cousins staying with her and she said I couldn't stay there anymore. It was kind of like a temporary place where I could crash when I didn't have any other place to stay. I could always stay at a friend's to crash or someone else's apartment to crash. That got really old though, because of was throwing up a lot being pregnant. All I really wanted was my own bed, not just a blanket on the floor. That's all I had though, at my Momma's. But all of the sudden, I didn't have no where to go. Nobody'd let me stay.*

--Rebecca

*I was tryin' to think of somewhere to stay. I knew for awhile that my Mom was getting' tired of me bein' at her trailer. I guess for a couple of months I thought about sleeping in an old wrecked car at a gas station. Then when that day got there, and she said I couldn't stay with her no more. I had been at a homeless shelter for kids so many times, but couldn't go back there because I had a kid and well, they saw some pot in my room there. My boyfriend had somebody else. I didn't really have any friends anymore. My father was in prison. My friends thought my*

*daughter was cute, but they lived with their parents or boyfriends. Nobody wanted me and my kid livin' with them. Then I got in the program and they put me with a family that was pretty nice, but they had too many rules. It was a place to stay though.*

--Missy

*I tried to go home after Daddy found out I didn't have the abortion, but he locked me out of the house and wouldn't let me in. So for a few nights, um.....we have this garage that we keep an old mower in out back and I slept in there. My Momma would let me in the house in the mornings when my Daddy was gone. He caught me one day when I was seein' Momma and told me to get out and not come back. Then I started stayin' with friends and boys and whoever would let me stay. I wanted my Momma though. When I got in the program, the director talked to my parents and they let me come home (with a lot of rules).*

--Christine

### **Participation in New Beginnings was Life-Saving and had Many Short-Term Positive Effects**

New Beginnings had goals and objectives of helping clients with safety issues, housing, finances, education, employment, mediation and reconciliation with family, and obtaining medical and prenatal care. Many short-term and positive effects were achieved during the teens' participation in the program.

*The program helped me with everything from going to the doctor, and going to the shrink, and going to school, and trying to help me get public aid, and this and that.*

--Christine

*I got a place to live and a job when I got into the program. The people in the program found me a place to stay with a foster family who would help me take care of my baby. Before I went into the program, I did not even go to the doctor. The foster mother made sure I went to the doctor. I was on the verge of going to jail for shoplifting too. I was really scared that I was going to have my baby in jail, but because I was in the program, the judge did not send me to jail.*

--Rebecca

The first objective of the program was to find the teen a safe and temporary place to live while she waited to find permanent housing. An underlying goal of the program was to reconcile the teen with her family, so that she and her child could live at home until she could become self-sufficient. Without the support of family and friends, a single parent will have an incredibly difficult life. Familial support is a lifeline for the young mother. Angela's mother wanted nothing to do with her daughter for she explained that Angela was a major disappointment. Mediation sessions were held with Rebecca and her mother in a successful attempt to bring the two together. For several months however, Rebecca stayed with a foster family. Christine returned home after a lengthy mediation session with her entire family. Missy's mother simply could not and would not let her daughter and granddaughter live with her. After spending several months with a foster family, Missy was asked to leave their premises. Missy then went to live at a church-based homeless shelter with her daughter.

*We came up with a plan to get along and I had to follow some rules that my Momma and Daddy set for me. I had to stop talkin' on the phone so much, but I could stay home and was happy about that.*

--Christine

*Because New Beginnings' director helped my Momma get and find a bigger place to live, I could live with her.*

--Rebecca

*When I didn't have a place to go, the Program's director took me to stay with a real (foster) family. The mother there was real nice. The family acted nice right off the bat and let me stay in their basement until I could find a place of my own for me and my baby. I had my own bed in my own room. While I was staying there, the Program director helped me get on a list for permanent housing. The list was real long, but since I was kinda like homeless and pregnant, they put me at the top of the list. The program director waited a long time in that housing office until she convinced a lady that I needed a permanent place real bad. It came through in 30 days.*

--Angela

*When I asked if I could be in the program, I got to go with my baby to a foster family who acted really nice until they said I had pot in their house. I started workin' on my GED. The foster mother lady watched my baby while I went to school. I got a job at Wendy's too, but I got fired after three days. But I had somewhere to stay. There was really no where else for me. I got on WIC (Woman Infants and Children) so I got some formula and baby food and cereal. Better than stealin' it.....*

--Missy

## **Finding Employment**

While they were enrolled in the program, each one of the participants found work, even at nine months pregnant. Rebecca nearly delivered her baby in a kitchen of a fast-food restaurant where she was washing dishes. The program also furnished clothing for the teens to go to work and school. The teens did not understand why anyone would buy them clothes.

*The people who worked for the program bought me some clothes because I didn't have anything to wear to go to school. I didn't have anything to wear because my belly wouldn't fit in my pants anymore. I got like five different outfits. That was fun. I went shopping and felt special. Hadn't felt that way much before.*

--Angela

## **Going to School**

In addition to work, the completion of high school or earning a GED (General Equivalency Diploma) was of utmost importance. The teens recognized that if they wanted the program to help them, they had to first learn to help themselves. They understood that they would enroll in an adult education class. The importance of the class was stressed, in addition to the fact that they would not be able to receive public assistance if they were not working toward a high school diploma or GED.

*I remember the very next day after signin' up for the program, the program's director took me to an adult education program. My parents were letting me stay with them since I was participating in the program. The program director picked me up real early and had to get me out of bed. I went and signed up for school that day. Then I went and got a bus pass so I could get to school. The people who worked with the program were real serious about me finishin' school.*

## **Obtaining Financial Assistance**

Another feature of the program allowed for the teen to obtain financial assistance of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). In an attempt to convince the teens that the aid would be a temporary arrangement, they were individually taken to the local public aid office to sign up for public assistance. The teens did attempt to obtain financial assistance on their own, but felt as if they were treated rudely and did not have the courage or patience to complete the complex process of applying for such assistance. Signing up for and receiving financial assistance is necessary if one wishes to obtain other emergency services such as medical care, government housing, and food stamps.

*I remember when I was living with the foster family, a girl who worked with the program took me to the public aid office and we went right in and got me signed up. Things seemed to happen once someone was helping me. The girl who worked for the program knew people at the public aid office. I didn't have to talk at all. Boom, it was done. I felt safer. In like thirty days or something, I got my first check.*

--Angela

## **Goals of the Program Were Achieved by Building Trust With Program Director**

The teens seemed to immediately benefit from the program after the director broke down barriers across socio-economic status, race and age. Trust seemed to be a central feature that needed to be established. After trust was gained, the young mothers believed that they could benefit from the program and were encouraged to meet the program's objectives. On-going support and encouragement by the program's director appeared to have the greatest effect on the teens' success in the program. The young women regularly needed to hear kind words of encouragement and support.

*I promised I would try hard and really wanted to be a part of the program. The program director picked me up on the streets with my stuff in a garbage bag. She got out of her car and opened the door for me. I knew then she was a good person. When she was trying to find me a place to stay, she knew I was tired of telling people my story and she did all of the talkin' for me. That made me like her even more.*

--Angela

## **The Participants were Dependent on the Program Director**

It was readily obvious that the teens needed someone to take care of them as their craving for love and support. They had many unmet physical and emotional needs. Rebecca, slept on the floor in her mother's apartment because she did not have a bed to sleep in. The teens began to rely on the program to meet all of their needs as well as requiring constant supervision and guidance to reach every small goal they wished to achieve. They cherished the fact that the program director believed in them. Ultimately, this led them to feeling left behind and stranded with a change in New Beginnings' management; a new person came on board as director.

*I liked the program director a lot. I loved her kind of like family. I remember one time when I took some pills and I had to go to the emergency room, my Momma wouldn't come to pick me up because Daddy was fishin'. But the program director sure did.*

--Angela

When the teens learned to trust the project director, they realized that someone was looking out for them and therefore, their success in the program depended on the daily interactions and help from the program director. Unfortunately that trust left them with strong issues of dependency.

It may have been that craving for love and their unmet emotional needs that led to them becoming pregnant, for they wanted to both love and be loved. After their families had learned about their pregnancies, they were met with disappointment and outright rejection. This left them feeling hopeless and helpless. When the program director filled the void that was lacking in their lives, the teens started meeting small goals and had a positive outlook toward their future and becoming self-sufficient.

*The program director helped me get my life together, she even helped me get a job at a theatre. She even helped me try to get back together with my Momma. Momma wouldn't budge, but I had the program.*

--Angela

*The people in the program were really nice to me. I felt like the program director was the only one who believed in me.*

--Rebecca

*I needed the program too much. I learned that when I wasn't in it no more.*

--Christine

*I didn't really have nobody to talk to. My Mom was always puttin' me down. I really didn't know how to take care of a baby. The program director showed me how to feed her solid food and give her a bath. She checked on me and I think cared about me. Even though I didn't really trust her, I trusted more than anybody else.*

--Missy

### **The Short-Term Positive Effects from the Program Lasted Until There A Was A Change in Program Management**

When the original program director resigned from the program, the change in management caused the previously established trust to erode. The barriers that had been broken were then lost and could not be repaired by the new administrative team that led the program. The teens stated that they did not like the new person who was administering the program. They said they were tired of telling their stories and having yet another person in their lives to learn to trust and depend on. Mostly, there did not want anyone new in their lives trying to help them or counsel them.

*After the program people changed, I had my first baby. I didn't like the new person who took over. I quit talking to them and coming to their meetings. I was already pregnant again too. I knew the people in the program would probably kick me out anyway.*

--Angela

*I didn't like nobody but the program director. The new people was always mean to me and didn't treat me very nice. As long as the first program director was there, I was happy. If I had to work with somebody else, I hated it.*

--Christine

*The services were real good while the first people in the program were there. I just hate having the new people get in my face and ask questions.*

--Rebecca

### **Termination of Participation in the Program Led to the Disintegration of the Programmatic Goals**

After the change in program management, the teens seemed to lose hope and eventually dropped out of the program. Actually, Christine was asked to leave the program because of her dedication to the former director.

*They kicked me out after the first program director left. Things just were not the same without her. I knew she went on to school or something, but I told the new people that I missed her and wished they were more like her. They didn't like me sayin' that and told me that I should find other serviced to help me. They told me to leave. I did right then too and never, ever went back.*

--Christine

Over time, when the teens were once again on their own, they dropped out of school because they felt they could not meet any goals without the support from someone that truly cared about their success. They also seemed to feel that they had gotten nearly all they could out of the program before their participation was terminated.

*I stayed in the program only for about a month after the first program director left. Since I had a new place at stay, at my Momma's new apartment, I didn't need anything else. Plus, I did not like the new people taking over the program. I felt like I couldn't trust somebody new. I did that and got burned too many times. The first program director used to help me study for the GED test. Without her help, I flunked my GED test and have not tried again. Got tired of people tellin' me things. I mean I didn't know them and I didn't like 'em.*

--Rebecca

Without daily interaction and support from the original program team, the teens found that they could not cope alone. They stated that it was their erratic work and school schedules that lead to their departure from the program. In essence, this was predominately due to the fact that if they felt that they had no one to push or encourage them to go to work or school, they might as well not work or attend school.

*I had to quit my job after the program director left 'cause it got too hard without her to help me through the hard times. It also got really hard to work when I was really getting big and pregnant.*

--Angela

*The first program director always was pushing me to study for the GED test and always helped me. When she left, I was on my own and flunked the test. I think I missed too many days of school really. My parents really didn't care if I went to school or not. I mean, they never finished high school, so why should I?*

--Christine

Both Angela and Christine got pregnant again within a year after ending their participation in the program. Rebecca, however, chose not to get pregnant again. She decided to have protected sex, mostly because she didn't want to get 'fat' again. An underlying reason for Angela and Christine's second pregnancies was that they were lacking the need to be loved and needed. As an example, Angela explained that she got pregnant again because she thought it would force her boyfriend to marry and take care of her and their first child. It appeared that the need to be needed and wanted is what led their next pregnancies. Ultimately, their families rejected them.

*I was pretty stupid, huh? After I had my first baby, I wanted to marry his father. I had my own place and wanted him to move in with me. I know he had another girlfriend, I so planned to get pregnant again after I had my first son. I thought that would make him want to marry me. But what happened was that I was stuck with a baby and another one on the way.*

--Angela

*I wasn't thinkin' I guess. My second baby's father told me that he loved me and was gonna take care of me and my other baby. Then when I told him I was pregnant, he said it wasn't his kid.*

--Christine

### **Without Support From the Program They Felt Hopeless and Helpless**

On one hand, the teens were better off than they had been two years prior when they first enrolled in the program. On the other, they showed feelings of despair and felt that their lives were not in their control. They stated that they had wishes and dreams but those visions, in their minds were too far away to reach. Christine wished she could become a pediatrician, but her failure to commit to finishing her GED would likely prevent her from doing anything more than food service or housekeeping jobs. The three teens had come to view themselves as poor young mothers who would not find their way out of dark tunnels that they had either been born into or had put themselves in. Those feelings were both chronic and persistent. The strongly felt hopeless and helpless on a consistent basis; the feelings came to be part of their being.

*I can't do anything. My Momma keeps me kids while I work, but since I am back livin' with both my parents, I will never get a chance to get ahead. My Daddy takes all of my money for living expenses. What am I gonna do, I live here and nobody cares here if I keep on havin' babies or stay on public aid. My sister is addicted to crack and has four kids. The State keeps givin' my Momma the kids and my sister just keeps getting' pregnant. Then I get in a program to help me go to school and succeed. But nobody really cares if I go to college or even get my GED. One day just turns into the next and nothin' happens. The program director believed in me. Nobody believes in me no more.*

--Christine



*I am still on TANF (public assistance) and don't know if I will ever have anything of my own. If it wasn't for the program, I don't know what would have happened to me. After the program director left and someone else took over, I didn't want to be in the program any more. I have a place to live now and am getting a check every month. In the long run, I am not the most motivated mother, but a welfare mother. I live day by day.*

*--Angela*

### **Discussion**

Although the sample was very small, this study conveyed the idea that if a troubled teen had a positive role model in her life, she could learn to set goals and put efforts forth to achieve them. However, the role model/mentor had to be a consistent and constant fixture in the teen's life. What resulted were issues of dependency entering the picture as a trusted outsider came into the teen's life. It was the actual learning to trust that created feelings of dependency. In turn, that feeling led to hopelessness and despair when that role model/mentor/fixture disappeared from the teen's life.

Sadly, these teen mothers were ultimately shunned and rejected by their own families. They attempted to find love in a relationship with a male that would promise to take care of them. When the teen ended up pregnant, her family often asks that she leave home, sometimes by force. As a result, the desperate teen mother found a person in a program that was willing to help her. She learned to trust and saw the program members' as her family. As a consequence of that trust, she started meeting the goals and objectives of the program. Due to a change in program management, trust was stripped away and the teen was once again left in a non-supportive and uncaring world where she would continue to struggle to love and be loved. When the program director left the program, the teens felt a void that could not be readily filled by someone new. Her small goals slowly slipped away and were forever out of reach. The succeeding program director faced a battle that could not be won. The teens simply did not want to tell their stories again or open their hearts to another.

Previous research on homeless females has done little in addressing teenage mothers who live on the streets. However, a theme emerged from prior research on homeless, re-emerged in this analysis: seeking shelter is the last resort. Homeless women exhaust all of their available options before they seek help. They live with different relatives and friends until their list is exhausted and there is nowhere else to turn (Sadler, Swartz, Ryan-Krause, Seitz, Meadows-Oliver, Grey and Clemmens, 2007). This study showed that a program of this nature would work well if trust could be established and constant monitoring of the teen was provided. Problematically, what resulted was a loss of trust because in the end, the teens were left alone. The new family they had moved on, which seems like a persistent cycle in the teen's life: feeling as if she is being left behind. Having a child only intensifies her problems. She will continue to search for love in the wrong places.

The young women believed that the program's services were adequate and responsive to their needs while being enrolled in the program. No one of them was left on the streets, bouncing from place to place. An immediate effect of the program was that of finding stability for the teen whether it was in a shelter, foster home, or through her return to her family's home. In addition, upon acceptance into the program, the teens were signed up for public assistance, medical care, education or vocational classes, and job interviews. Short-term objectives were achieved. An unexpected consequence of the departure of the original program director was feelings of hopelessness and despair. However, they did learn that they could trust someone, which was a gift in itself. Homeless teen mother programs can be very important to the young mothers only if it connects them to another or gives them the ability to learn to hope in a tough world. Ideally, such programs will strive to help young mothers sustain ties in the community so that even if their own families will not serve as a source of support, it can be found elsewhere.

Findings from these few participants validated what other researchers have established pertaining to the struggles of and reasons for homelessness among teen mothers. The interview questions utilized in this analysis have not been previously implemented; therefore, sufficient evidence for validity cannot be provided. Furthermore, validity and reliability cannot be established, as this was a very small sample. Although the small, non-random sample limits the generalizability of findings, few programs that serve to assist homeless teens have been evaluated using a qualitative research strategy. Future exploration of prevention and intervention efforts should be sought regarding homeless teen mothers and their children. As shown, the homeless teen mothers are as a group, a neglected area of research. However, future efforts must be taken, as a life and a child without a home may be a life lost. Especially at this time of hardship in society and record levels of homelessness, the safety and shelter of pregnant teens and their children are paramount.

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