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Teens helping teens

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Monica Roman and Christian Giuseffi are health educators of a different sort. Teenagers themselves, they are part of a team of specially trained high schoolers who try to teach kids about sex, sexuality, birth control and abstinence.

"A lot of teens have no one to talk to, and they feel like they can't talk to their parents," said Roman, 18.

"They feel more comfortable with us," added Giuseffi, who is 17.

Planned Parenthood's Teen Advocate program is one way community leaders and health experts are trying to tackle the high teen pregnancy rate in the Bronx.

Last month, Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden said a survey of vital health statistics for 2003 showed teen pregnancies are down around the city. But he said teen pregnancies in the Bronx are "astronomically high" at 127 per 1,000.

There were 2,591 births to teens in the Bronx in 2003 - more than any other borough.

"When we talk about teenage pregnancy, in many cases there is a direct link between poverty and lack of economic and educational opportunities," said Joan Malin, chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood of New York City. "This should not be looked at as a Bronx problem."

Indeed, the teen birth numbers are high in other low-income neighborhoods, including Brownsville, Brooklyn; Corona, Queens and Washington Heights, Manhattan.

In an effort to battle the problem, teen advocates get their messages out through dramatic skits they write and perform.

One, "Burnt," explores how two young lovers deal with the news that the boyfriend has a sexually transmitted disease. "Maybe Baby" shows how a young woman, in a bad relationship with her own mother, contemplates having a baby of her own to ease the pain.

The skits are usually open-ended, allowing questions, comments and discussion from the young audiences.

Roman and Giuseffi would like to see more active programs in schools, where students can get confidential advice and access to birth control.

"They are really pushing abstinence," Roman said.

"They have to think about reality," Giuseffi added.

Under current regulations, students are allowed to get condoms in school resource rooms - unless their parents bar them from doing so.

"There's a longstanding policy on condom distribution in the schools, and I think the key is to make sure that that policy - which was approved 10 years ago after a lot of debate - gets implemented as it was approved," Frieden said.

But the resource rooms usually are not very accessible - or very private - according to students and advocates.

"I would love to see trained health care educators in all of the schools, and I would love to see resource rooms expanded and confidential to teens," said Malin. "We know confidentiality is key."