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Bureaucratic maze daunting for teen moms looking for help

By SANDRA FARIAS, THE CANADIAN PRESS

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EDMONTON — Juelle Smalridge was overwhelmed when she became a mother at age 17, but she juggled her new parental responsibilities with her studies and finished high school, something not many teen parents in Alberta are able to do.

Smalridge, who is now 18 with a 14-month-old son, is one of the successful students at Braemar, a school created by the Terra Association for pregnant and parenting teens in Edmonton.

"Unfortunately, the percentage going back to school is very small," said Karen Mottershead, executive director at Terra.

Many teen mothers quit classes because they are living on their own, without family support, and are daunted by a bureaucratic maze they must navigate to get government help to go back to school, Mottershead said.

There are 37 agencies and dozens of programs for children and parents, but Alberta doesn't have a dedicated pot of money for teen moms, so they have to meet the same criteria as an adult parent looking for aid in several areas.

"It's almost that they have been penalized by the system for being pregnant," Mottershead said.

She said the current system doesn't consider the challenges faced by young mothers who are living on their own. And statistics show that teenagers who give birth, particularly between the ages of 15 and 17, are likely to be single.

"What we find most striking is that this is not people trying to apply for post-secondary education, they just want to go through high school, which is a fundamental right."

Terra's research has identified "significant challenges in securing financial assistance to complete high school," such as different eligibility levels, administrative requirements and processing times which contribute to delays.

The government recognizes the problem.

Cathy Ducharme, spokeswoman for Children and Youth Services, suggests "it's easier for young parents to contact an in-take worker rather than navigate the system by themselves."

Terra is currently working on a report that recommends one funding package for teen moms that would help pay for food, shelter and child care as soon as they go back to school.

Child-bearing not only risks a young mother's education, but also reduces her employment opportunities.

"I've been looking for a job since June, but most employers will see you as irresponsible because you have a child," said Smalridge.

Social assistance is available, but teen mothers must be at least 18 to qualify. Those who are younger and want to return to school must show an income tax return and be enrolled full-time before they can receive funding.

And once money is secured, not having a babysitter, especially when a child is sick, might force a mother to miss classes and jeopardize her government cheque.

Finding child care can be difficult when class schedules conflict with nurturing a baby, said Adine Shuchuk, co-ordinator for West Edmonton Parent Link, another agency that helps teen moms.

"Teens with children don't get offered the same rights as an adult."

Another chronic problem for young mothers is housing.

"Having affordable housing, being able to manage their bills ... are key components for these kids to succeed," said Vicky Green, a community worker at St. Mary's, a social group in Ottawa.

Many organizations say funding for teen parents hasn't increased in many years, although services are more complex and budgets are being stretched to provide counselling, home visits, housing and education.

Despite a decline in the teen pregnancy rate, the birth rate among women 15 to 19 is still very high in Canada compared with other developed nations such as France, Germany, Italy and the Scandinavian countries, according to Statistics Canada.

Teenage pregnancy rates tends to be higher in the North and the Prairie provinces, while Quebec shows the lowest numbers in the country.

A Public Health Canada report in 2004 said the rate in First Nations adolescent girls (under the age of 15) was especially high, particularly on reserves, where it was about 18 times higher than girls in the general Canadian population.

Teen pregnancy is easier to prevent when sex education is part of schooling and family conversations, Mottershead suggested.

But in Alberta new legislation gives parents the right to pull their children from classrooms when teachers are discussing sexual orientation and sexuality.

It's a step back from some of the "good work done to empower young people and to educate teens to have healthy relationships," she said.

"If now we're going to be further under the cloak, we don't know the consequences."

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