

Alpha Pregnancy Center presents abstinence education program at Mt. Mariah Baptist Church

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

MELVIN – “Studies show that 66% of students who are taught abstinence education choose not to have sex before marriage,” Teresa Howard of Alpha Pregnancy Testing Center told the crowd at Mt. Mariah Baptist Church in Melvin last Wednesday.

In an effort to reach local youth with the message of abstinence, Howard and a group of volunteers from the Jackson-based center presented what they hope will be the first in a series of presentations introducing the abstinence-only S.A.F.E. (Sex and Family Education) program to Choctaw County. The highly-effective Biblically-based program is part of the center's goal of preventing the problems – including physical, emotional, and spiritual – that are inevitable when teens engage in sexual activity before marriage.

Citing eye-opening statistics about teen sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases, and teen pregnancy, Howard and the Alpha volunteers presented a condensed version of SAFE program that is now being presented in schools in Clarke and Washington counties. Tentative plans are now being made to teach the SAFE program to teens in Choctaw County schools beginning this fall.

The program highlights good decision-making, the consequences of making wrong choices, and the benefits of waiting for mature, marital relationships before becoming sexually active.

While reports by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in 2005 showed that 46.8% of students in grades 9-12 had had sexual intercourse at least once, studies by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also show that there are ways to lower that percentage. In particular, the CDC reports that the most effective way to reduce the numbers of teens who are having sex – and the myriad of problems that come along with it – is through the teaching of abstinence programs like SAFE.

However, with the Democratic Congress now threatening to reduce and

Program to be used in local schools this fall



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Teresa Howard of Alpha Pregnancy Testing Center in Jackson presents an overview of the SAFE curriculum to adults at Mt. Mariah, while the youth attend classes geared toward their age levels.

even eliminate funding for programs that do not focus on the use of condoms and birth control, privately funded and non-profit organizations like Alpha are presenting the abstinence message without governmental assistance.

In order to reach the youth at their own level, the Alpha volunteers divided the session at Mt. Mariah into age groups from elementary to middle school to high school. While others taught the material to the youth who were in attendance, Howard presented the material to the adults, showing them just what is involved in the program so that they will not only be taught the same principles but will also be familiar with what is being taught to the youth.

Among the most critical reasons for promoting abstinence, Howard told the group, is the rising incidence of sexually transmitted diseases in the United States, especially among teens and young adults.

“All of us, no matter

our background, have an interest in STD prevention,” said Howard. “All communities are impacted by this.”

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 19 million people in the United States will contract some type of STD this year, including one in every three sexually active high school students.

By far, Chlamydia is the most rapidly-growing STD today. In 2005, the CDC reported some 976,445 cases of the bacterial infection, and the number is growing by about 100,000 per year. Mississippi has higher incidence of Chlamydia per percentage of population than any other state, at a rate of almost 733 cases per 100,000 population, and Alabama ranks 15th at about 378 per 100,000.

There were also nearly 340,000 cases of gonorrhea reported in the United States in 2005, along with 33,278 cases of syphilis.

As for the most deadly

Because of abstinence

The teenage pregnancy rate in this country is at its lowest level in 30 years, down 36% since its peak in 1990. A growing number of studies suggest that increased abstinence is responsible, in a large part, for recent declines, including the following:

- The teenage pregnancy rate among high school students declined 28% between 1990 and 2002.
- The teenage birthrate in 2002 was 30% lower than the peak rate of 61.8 births per 1,000 women, reached in 1991.
 - Between 1998 and 2000, teenage pregnancy rates declined in every state and in the District of Columbia.
- By 2002, the teenage abortion rate had dropped by 50%.
- Among black women aged 15–19, the nationwide pregnancy rate fell by 40% between 1990 and 2002.
- Among white teenagers, it declined by 34% during the same time period.

(Information from the Guttmacher Institute, 2006)

of the STDs, AIDS/HIV infections are still taking hundreds of thousands of lives each year. In 2005, the estimated number of persons living with AIDS in the United States was 437,982, according to the CDC. This included 422,143 adults and adolescents, and 3,764 children under age 13.

The spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs among teens is augmented by the number who acknowledge having multiple sexual partners at young ages. A 2005 survey by the NCHS showed that 14.3% of teens in grades 9-12 admitted having already had 4 or more partners.

While preventing STDs is one of the primary reasons for highlighting abstinence, Howard also highlighted the obvious benefit of abstinence education – the prevention of teen pregnancy.

“About 1 in every 4 sexually active high school students will become pregnant,” Howard said. “Many will end up living below the poverty line, and children born to unwed mothers are more likely to have children born out of wedlock themselves.”

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, about 750,000 teenagers become pregnant each year in the United States. In Alabama, there were 7,903 births to teens in the state in 2005, with the

youngest mother only 12 years old.

A host of studies show that abstinence programs like SAFE are effective in reducing the numbers of teen having sex at early ages. In fact, the numbers having steadily declined over the past decade.

The NCHS reports that, in 1991, for example, about 54.1% of teens had engaged in sexual intercourse by the time they reached the 12th grade. That number had declined to 48.4% by 1997, and to 45.6% by 2001. Although the number crept back up slightly in 2005, it still stands at 46.8%.

The teen pregnancy rate has also declined in recent years, and is at its lowest level in 30 years. Research shows that the numbers can be attributed, at least in part, to abstinence education programs.

In addition to reducing the physical consequences of disease and pregnancy, the SAFE program also highlights emotional and spiritual reasons for choosing abstinence, including focusing on the God-ordained reasons for sexual relationships.

“We need to teach these kids that God designed the sexual relationship for a man and woman in a marriage relationship,” Howard explained. “We need to teach them to keep it within that relationship.”

Although the material is based on Biblical prin-

ciples, Howard said that the program is presented without the obvious gospel message when it is taught in public schools. Yet, she adds, presenting the material without showing the Bible as its centerpiece is often difficult.

“The greatest service we offer is to tell them about Christ because that is the real answer,” she told the group at Melvin. “If you are going to make a life change, you are going to have to make a heart change.”

“This program is not really about us or about Alpha Center,” she added. “It is about Jesus Christ and what he wants to do in your life and in the lives of your children.”

With or without its Christian message, abstinence programs have shown success across the country, and Howard says that the need for such programs is evident. For about 66% of those who are taught it, abstinence education programs like SAFE will change the way they think about becoming sexually active.

But, Howard acknowledges, 66% is not enough.

“We want it to be 100%,” she emphasized to the congregation at Melvin. “Do we need abstinence education? The answer is ‘yes’, and I hope tonight you will hear my heart and, like me, you will be overwhelmed and say ‘how can I help the children in my community to make the right decisions?’”

Proposed new grant could expand T.G.I.F. program to eleven counties

Letters of support still needed to get program refunded

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER – An abstinence education program that has been in place in Choctaw and eight other Alabama counties over the past 13 years could be expanded to include more counties and reach more age groups if a new grant proposal is approved by the federal government.

“We have submitted another grant to ask for \$587,000 to expand T.G.I.F. (Teens Getting Involved for the Future) to 11 counties,” former Extension Coordinator Elaine Alberson told members of the Choctaw County Health Council during a meeting last week. “We hope to also add a component for a

10th grade curriculum and provide materials for younger children.”

Alberson, along with Sumter County Extension Coordinator Denise Shirley, began the TGIF program in 1994 after an eye-opening assessment revealed that their two counties were showing high incidences of teen pregnancy and other problems associated with teen sexual activity.

Funded through a federal Title V grant, the program was implemented in nine counties throughout the state. Since then, high school students with a personal commitment to abstinence have been teaching 6th graders the importance of making such decisions for their own lives. More than 30,000 young people have participated in the program throughout the state.

But in recent months, the push against abstinence-only educational programs has risen dramatically on a national level – a push that could directly affect the T.G.I.F. program. The push against the programs has come primarily through

the lobbying efforts of organizations such as the Sexuality Information Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS) and Planned Parenthood, who are lobbying instead for programs that include so-called ‘safe sex’ instruction.

The 109th Congress did not reauthorize funding for Title V Abstinence Education Programs, including T.G.I.F., before concluding its session in December, and proponents of such programs have been afraid that there is an even less likely chance that the new Democratic Congress will do so. Current funding for Title V programs will extend only through June 30 of this year unless Congress votes to reauthorize them.

However, Alberson said that there is a growing sentiment in Washington that the abstinence programs will, in fact, be refunded, along with programs that are not abstinence-only.

“We feel like both types of programs will be funded,” she said. “It’s still if’y, but we hope we will get it.”

Alberson told the Health Council that, if funding is approved, the grant may also make it possible to provide a faith-based component to the program by bringing in ministers and others to work with the youth.

“We should hear something by September on this,” Alberson said. “The program begins in October.”

(ED. NOTE: The public is asked to send letters in support of abstinence programs like TGIF to our elected officials in Washington to ensure that the programs are funded. Here is contact information for Alabama's congressional delegation: Sen. Richard Shelby, 110 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510, (202) 224-5744, FAX (202) 224-3416, senator@shelby.senate.gov; Sen. Jeff Sessions, 335 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510, (202) 224-4124, FAX (202) 224-3149, senator@sessions.senate.gov; Rep. Artur Davis, 208 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515, (202) 225-2665, FAX (202) 226-9561.)



Photo by Sherry Taylor

Sharp speaks to REACH 2010

SILAS – Theron Sharp was guest speaker at the April meeting of REACH 2010, held at Shiloh Baptist Church in Silas. Sharp spoke to the group about his battle with cancer and the importance of screening for early detection.

Correction

BUTLER -- In an feature article published in the April 18th issue, Doris Jackson was inadvertently left off of the list of volunteers who give of their time at Willow Trace Nursing Center. We apologize for the omission and thank Doris for her service to the residents and staff at the center.