



Fact Sheet

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The Pregnancy Assistance Fund as a Support for Student Parents in Postsecondary Education

Pregnancy and parenting can pose special challenges to students enrolled in secondary and postsecondary education, including issues related to child care, financial aid, transportation, and academic and career planning. In some circumstances, the responsibilities related to pregnancy and parenting can undermine students' ability to pursue and complete their educational goals, particularly among students enrolled in community college and other two-year institutions. Only 40 percent of students with dependent children—across all institution types—completed a degree or certificate within six years of enrolling, compared to 54 percent of student who did not have children (Miller, Gault, and Thorman, 2011). Yet, despite the significant challenges many student parents face, few federal programs exist to provide supports to help these student parents succeed in postsecondary education. The Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) is a competitive grant program created by the Affordable Care Act (ACA) that provides funding to states and tribes to support programs that provide pregnant and parenting women and girls with supportive services to help them complete high school or postsecondary degrees (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010a). Only two states, Minnesota and Virginia, have used their PAF grants to provide services related to postsecondary institutions. This fact sheet describes several of the programs and initiatives created by these PAF grantees. Unless otherwise noted, all program information comes from interviews with program officials and staff.

Pregnancy Assistance Fund

The PAF was authorized in Spring 2010 as a part of the ACA. Under the ACA, the PAF is authorized until 2019 with an annual appropriation of \$25 million (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010b). Administered by the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) to the departments of health in approved grantee states, all PAF grants must conduct at least one of three activities:

- 1) support pregnant and parenting students at institutions of higher education;
- 2) support pregnant and parenting teens at high schools and community service centers; and
- 3) improve services for pregnant women who are victims of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, sexual assault, and stalking (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010).

In addition to their primary activity, grantees may also use their PAF funding to create or support education campaigns to increase awareness about student parents and the challenges they face.

Since 2010, OAH has issued 17 three-year grants for amounts ranging from \$500,000 to \$2 million. Most states have chosen to focus their activities around teen parents but two states, Minnesota and Virginia, have chosen to partner with institutions of higher education to establish and expand supports for student parents in postsecondary education.

Minnesota: *Young Student Parent Support Initiative*

Developed by the Division of Community and Family Health, Maternal and Child Health Section of the Minnesota Department of Health, the Young Student Parent Support Initiative (YSPSI) was created in response to the lack of targeted supports for student parents at the postsecondary level. In Minnesota, 21 percent of all students in postsecondary education are single parents, while almost one-third of all students attending public two-year institutions nationwide reported being single parents (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2012; Miller, Gault, and Thorman 2011). The initiative uses PAF funding to expand two student -parent support programs, at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and St. Catherine University, and to support the creation of nine “start-up” student parent programs at universities, community colleges, and tribal colleges in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and greater Minnesota.¹ Each partner institution is allowed to design their program to meet the needs and demographics of their campus population. All activities, however, must work towards YSPSI’s goals of encouraging the postsecondary success of the parent and increasing the health and well-being of the students and their children.

Nearly all of the institutions involved in YSPSI, including those launching start-up programs, had at least a limited number of services for student parents prior to joining the initiative, so many schools have used the grants to expand and add new components to existing services. For example, the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, has intensified its recruitment of first-time parents and newly-pregnant students into the Student Parent Higher Education for Low-Income Parents (HELP) Center, the campus’ office for student parent support. According to Susan Warfield, Director of the HELP Center, pregnancy and the birth of a first child can present a crisis for young parents, who often feel pressure to stop out or drop out of school as a result. The center has used its PAF funding to hire a full-time staff member dedicated entirely to new parent outreach, including visits to neighboring clinics and doctors’ offices. In addition, Warfield coordinates a system of “intrusive advising” wherein first-time parents receive multiple follow-ups from the HELP Center staff as well a “Bundle of Love” that contains layettes, toys, and quilts hand-knitted by a local partner organization. For many new parents, Warfield says, the “Bundle of Love” is the first congratulatory gift that they have received for their child. Both the “Bundle of Love” and follow-up calls are meant to provide new parents with essential social and academic support and encourage them to become further involved with HELP Center activities, including two recently established “New Moms & Dads” support groups.

¹ The nine institutions with program start-up grants are Century College, Dakota County Technical College, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Leech Lake Tribal College, Metropolitan State University, Pine Technical College, Riverland Community College, St. Cloud State University, and Winona State University.

St. Catherine University, also awarded an YSPSI program expansion grant, has similarly focused on increasing services for student parents considered to be particularly at risk of dropping out. The university has used their PAF funding to expand “Steps to Success,” an intensive case management program for young student parents who are struggling to earn their baccalaureate degrees. Students enrolled in the program meet twice a week with a case manager from the staff of Access and Success, St. Catherine’s student parent program, to establish and review goals. Students in the program also agree to maintain a 2.5 grade point average and participate in leadership activities such as student organizations and community service. In exchange, students receive a \$1,350 scholarship or stipend. Started in 2009, “Steps to Success” has enjoyed positive preliminary results: of the ten students in the original cohort, four graduated within three years of entering the program and the rest are still enrolled. Conversely, in a comparison group of ten students with children who did not participate in the program, six students dropped out within the three years. With their YSPSI funding, St. Catherine’s has been able to expand “Steps to Success” to include eight additional students and maintain scholarships for the current participants. St. Catherine’s has also used their YSPSI grant to expand the “Mother to Mother” initiative, a leadership and outreach program that connects student parents from Access and Success with local pregnant and parenting high school students, to encourage them to pursue postsecondary education. With PAF funding, Access and Success was able to add part-time staff to help manage the program and provide stipends to the parent volunteers.

Whereas institutions receiving program expansion grants have focused primarily on creating supports for student parents particularly at risk for academic failure, institutions with YSPSI’s program start-up grants have focused largely on creating programming that builds community and social supports among student parents. Winona State University, for example, has expanded a small, pre-existing student group into a rotating set of formalized support groups. The three groups—a fathers’ group, a mothers’ group, and a “combined” group—meet weekly at three locations: Winona State, nearby Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical College, and Winona’s campus in Rochester, Minnesota. A light meal is provided at each meeting and speakers are invited to discuss topics such as financial aid, paternal and custodial rights, and lactation. Similarly, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College has partnered with the Carlton County Public Health Department to create bi-weekly parenting classes for student parents. Held in the campus’ new Young Student Parent Center, each class begins with 30 minutes of parent-child playtime—directed by a certified ECFE teacher—followed by an instructor-led discussion. The discussions, led by nurses from the Carlton County Public Health and the nearby Fond du Lac Reservation, have included topics such as child development, discipline, safety, and establishing routines with children. The Young Student Parent Center is also open during the school week for student parents to use for study, lactation, or play time with children between classes.

Economic hardships, even when small in scale, can derail student parents’ education, particularly if a student is low-income and/or a single parent. In addition to providing social support, both Winona State and Fond du Lac have also used their YSPSI funding to provide economic support for student parents and to connect them with vital resources, both on and off campus. For example, in addition to creating an emergency child care grant, Winona State has also created paid task force positions for the program’s student parent leadership. The positions are meant to give student parents an opportunity for flexible, on-campus part-time work while also providing crucial input and insights into the needs of this part of the student body. Many of the student

parents who attend Winona and surrounding campuses have to work at least part-time to support their families, but it has become increasingly difficult for student parents to find work with sufficient pay or adequately flexible scheduling. By ensuring that student parents are represented on staff, the program provides flexible work opportunities for student parents with the added benefit of ensuring meaningful parental input into program operations.

Fond du Lac's Young Student Parent Center has also worked to address the economic needs of student parents by providing participants with gift cards for essentials such as gas and groceries. The gift cards are provided as incentives to participate in program activities and events, and activities that increase their academic success and campus engagement (e.g. visiting a tutor, joining a club, etc.).

As part of their ongoing partnership with the Carlton County Public Health, the Fond du Lac Young Student Parent Center has also taken on YSPSI's goal of improving the health of students and their children. The center connects student parents to public health nurses who conduct home visits, delivering health screenings and immunizations to both the parents and their children. The student parent program also links students to campus and community resources—including Federal TRIO Programs, the Boys and Girls Club, and local child care centers—that can provide additional supportive services.

Virginia: *Virginia Pregnancy Assistance Fund Grant*

Virginia's Pregnancy Assistance Fund Grant is coordinated by the Division of Child and Family Health of the Virginia Department of Health. In Virginia, unplanned pregnancies accounted for 49 percent of all births to women ages 18–29 in 2008; only 13 percent of women with children in this same age range reported that they had graduated college (Virginia Department of Health 2011). The Pregnancy Assistance Fund Grant initiative was created to address the gap in supports available for young, pregnant, and parenting students at institutions of higher education, in order to help them either transition from high school to college or stay in college after a pregnancy. The program currently supports the establishment of offices of pregnant and parenting student support (OPPSS) at eight colleges throughout the state.² The offices operate year-round and focus on connecting students to existing campus and community resources, including academic services, child care, family planning, and health services. Institutions are also encouraged to help students apply for public benefits such as WIC, SNAP, and TANF, and several offices are preparing to train staff to provide on-campus eligibility screenings. Offices are also required to provide several in-house supports, including tutoring, mentoring, and academic planning (with a special focus on balancing school and family obligations).

The Virginia Pregnancy Assistance Fund Grant also requires all student parent support offices to conduct programming about sexual assault, domestic violence, and stalking. Each office must incorporate information on intimate partner violence into their on-site programming, both as part

² The eight institutions are Northern Virginia Community College, Paul D. Camp Community College, Patrick Henry Community College, Southside Virginia Community College, Southwest Virginia Community College, Tidewater Community College, Virginia Western Community College, and Norfolk State University.

of enrollment counseling and planned events. In addition, each office must work to identify student parents who may be experiencing violence and provide referrals to appropriate counseling and supports. Finally, each office is responsible for coordinating at least one campus-wide campaign or activity designed to reduce the incidence of domestic violence and sexual assault such as the Red Flag Campaign, Take Back the Night, the Clothesline Project, or the White Ribbon Campaign. These actions, while meant to focus on student parents in particular, are also meant to raise the awareness of students on campus in general.

Most of the institutions participating in Virginia Pregnancy Assistance Fund provided services to student parents prior to contracting with the program and, as a result, many are still in the initial phases of set-up and outreach. Nevertheless, nearly all of the support offices have begun identifying and contacting student parents, administering domestic violence/sexual assault related staff and student trainings, providing referrals for childcare and other needed resources, and many have already begun awareness-raising efforts among administrative leadership.

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