

A Safe Haven for At-Risk Teenagers

Sponsor: New Hanover Health Network

Location: Wilmington, NC

A confluence of troubling social indicators led to the creation of Wilmington Health Access for Teens. Wilmington, N.C., became a tourist destination after Interstate 40 was extended to the coast in the early 1990s. Soon, New Hanover County had the second-highest per capita housing starts in the nation. But it also led the state in foster placements and had the second-highest child abuse and eighth-highest juvenile arrest rates. "Our kids were really at risk and things were about to break loose," says Connie Parker, WHAT executive director. "Organizations were handling it individually as always, but it was piecemeal, and we realized we needed a place for them to go."

After years of planning and fund-raising, WHAT opened its doors in 1997. It provides physical and mental health services to youths ages 11 to 24, nearly three-quarters of whom are either uninsured or covered by Medicaid or other state programs. Adolescents are not only the focus of care, but from the start have been integral to WHAT's development. A teen advisory board helped select its site and continues to influence its direction. Youths also have the opportunity to become health educators, making presentations in the community and sharing knowledge with peers. Other outreach projects address pregnancy and smoking prevention. Parents, too, are involved. State confidentiality laws allow care for certain conditions without parental consent, but ultimately, 96 percent of WHAT patients gain permission. "The link between families and teens is important. We're not trying to go around families," Parker says.

So far, WHAT has surpassed expectations. The main center--located near Wilmington's busiest shopping mall--is operating at capacity, and a 5,300-square-foot addition is under construction. In 1999, WHAT began providing services at an alternative high school, and it is the designated medical provider for children in foster care. Since its establishment, non-emergency visits by adolescents at New Hanover EDs have declined relative to overall emergency visits, and teenage pregnancy rates have dropped by one-third.

New Hanover Health Network was at the table early on and continues to be an ardent supporter, providing direct and in-kind funding, helping obtain grants, and encouraging other agencies and organizations to participate. "We think it's the absolute best approach to dealing with teen problems that have to some extent been ignored, and it's one of the most important places we can focus our attention. Teens are the future of our county and our country," says William Atkinson, president and chief executive officer of New Hanover.

THE PROBLEM: No coordinated initiative to serve increasing numbers of at-risk teenagers as the population and certain social problems surged in Wilmington and surrounding New Hanover County, N.C.

THE PLAYERS: Wilmington Health Access for Teens, New Hanover Health Network, numerous other county agencies and organizations.

THE PLAN: Build a health center for teenagers; offer physical and mental health services to those in need.

THE RESULTS: More than 22,000 patients visits, decreasing non-emergency use of emergency departments, declining teen pregnancy rates.

Caption

Connie Parker, executive director of the Wilmington Health Access for Teens, discusses strategies of the day with high school "peer health educators."

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