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## Palin situation brings teen pregnancy to light

### Local experts say it can happen to anyone regardless of wealth

September 3, 2008 By [TED SLOWIK](#)  
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Becky Beilfuss hopes something positive will come of all the attention being paid to the pregnancy of Bristol Palin, the 17-year-old daughter of Alaska governor and Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin.

Beilfuss is executive director of Glen Ellyn-based Teen Parent Connection, a nonprofit organization that offers programs and pregnancy prevention education to teens throughout DuPage and neighboring counties.

"I hope this focuses attention on the reality of teen pregnancy and parenthood," Beilfuss said of the Palin pregnancy. "There's nothing glamorous about it. This young woman is going to struggle with adjustment from adolescence into parenthood."

Soon after Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain announced Friday he picked Palin to be his running mate, reports emerged about her daughter's pregnancy. Sarah Palin says her daughter is five months pregnant and plans to marry the baby's father, an 18-year-old who plays hockey at Bristol Palin's high school.

While Bristol Palin's private life should be considered out of bounds from media scrutiny, it is fair to be critical of conservatives who defend this pregnancy while chastising other pregnancies, said Steve Maynard Caliendo, associate professor of political science at Naperville's North Central College.

"If this were the teenage daughter of a Democratic candidate - particularly if it were a candidate of choice - the James Dobsons and Pat Robertsons would be pointing fingers, saying that it was the liberal lifestyle and culture that was to blame," Caliendo said. "Democrats are hypocrites if they make this an issue. To the extent that Republicans condone it, though, it is fair to call them out on their selective compassion."

The Palin pregnancy illustrates how teen pregnancies affect people of all economic, social, racial and ethnic backgrounds, local experts say.

"This goes to show teen pregnancy knows no boundary," Beilfuss said. "It takes something like this to say, 'Look, it can happen to anyone, even governors.'"

In DuPage County, teen birth rates are on the rise. From 2005 to 2006 - the most recent year for which statistics are available - DuPage experienced an almost 9 percent increase in teen parenthood, with 557 births to mothers 19 years old or younger, the Illinois Department of Public Health reported.

In Naperville, the number of teen mothers giving birth increased 36 percent to 26 in 2006 from 19 in 2005, said Laura Carlin, Teen Parent Connection's prevention program coordinator. Downers Grove and Hinsdale are among other DuPage communities that saw increases, she said.

Schools in Naperville have excellent health education programs that cover decision-making and other aspects facing teens confronted with questions about sexual activity. Some believe teens from higher-income families are more likely to terminate pregnancies, though there is a lack a research on the question, Carlin said.

"What we see are higher birth rates in lower-income areas," Carlin said. The notion that

young women and girls from higher-income families would be more likely to terminate pregnancies "is an assumption many make," she said.

Between 2005 and 2006, teen births in Will County increased 6.4 percent to 631. Statewide, births to teens increased to 18,027, up 3.9 percent. Teen births in Illinois peaked at 34,742 in 1970.

Last year, Teen Parent Connection served more than 400 young families through its family strengthening programs, and more than 12,000 middle- and high-school students heard its prevention message.

Staff writers Paige Winfield and Katie Foutz contributed to this report.