For Immediate Release

MCHD receives grant to study adolescent sexual health

MORGANTOWN, WV (July 24, 2018) — In 2015, nearly 27 percent of West Virginia ninth graders reported that they had engaged in sex, as did 39 percent of 10th graders, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov).

A CDC report also shows that West Virginia adolescents ages 10 to 19 report the second-highest rate of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs.) In 2015, the same group accounted for 30.2 percent of chlamydia cases, 18.2 percent of gonorrhea cases and 6.4 percent of syphilis cases.

In an effort to change the statistics, Monongalia County Health Department applied for and was awarded a $20,000 grant to study adolescent sexual health.

Dr. Lee B. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer, noted that because sexually transmitted infections are on the rise and many times syphilis has HIV as a co-infection, the importance of getting these infections under control is of huge importance. One of the most effective means of preventing these infections is through education.

Lauren E. Branch, MCHD grant writer and a doctoral candidate at West Virginia University’s School of Public Health, wrote the application for the grant, which came from the National Association of County & City Health Officials (NACCHO). Monongalia County was one of only four awardees, and the only one in a rural area. The other three went to institutions in Nashville, Tennessee, St. Louis, Missouri and St. Petersburg, Florida.

The grant title is: “Increasing the capacity of local health departments to prevent HIV and STDs in adolescents through CDC-developed, school-based approaches for health education, health services and safe and supportive environments.”
“We want to gather people in the community to identify and implement strategies in schools that will reduce HIV and STDs in adolescents,” Branch said. What is clear, Smith added, is that adolescents are not always fully aware of the significance and the implications of their decisions, which puts them at greater risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV or becoming pregnant.

As in the rest of the United States, teen pregnancy rates in West Virginia have been declining; however, in the Mountain State, this is occurring at a lower rate. The state’s teen pregnancy rate declined 45 percent between 1991 and 2015, compared to a 64 percent drop in the United States.

Also, Branch noted that West Virginia’s rate is high compared to the nation. “Mon County is low compared to the rest of the state, but we have higher numbers than the national average.”

In 2010, 9.3 percent of teenage girls in the U.S. went through pregnancies, compared to 12.8 percent of teenage girls in West Virginia during the same time.

One of the grant’s goals will be to increase knowledge of services available in the county, Branch said. This includes free and low-cost birth control and free STD testing and treatment at Monongalia County Health Department, where this care is private and confidential regardless of a patient’s age.

“The second thing we want to accomplish is to make students in schools feel safe asking nurses and health educators questions about where they can go to get services, so they can come to places like the health department and feel comfortable getting treatment,” Branch said.

MCHD will collaborate with Mon County Schools as well as community stakeholders and leaders to brainstorm ideas and implement a plan of action.

“Monongalia County Schools is looking forward to working with Monongalia County Health Department to determine if additional information and agencies may be needed to improve adolescent health,” said Susan Haslebacher, RN, CSN, supervisor of School Health & Homebound for Mon County Schools.

Currently, MCHD staff is creating a survey that school health nurses will fill out in an effort to help assess how students’ health needs are currently met.

Morgantown High School already has a peer educator program that gives students the opportunity to pass on information about a variety of topics to fellow students. A peer
educator attended a two-day meeting at the health department in mid-January headed by NAACHO facilitators. This meeting was also attended by other community stakeholders, including parents, nurses, social workers, teachers and researchers who discussed ways to improve adolescent sexual health in Monongalia County.

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