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Budget ax fells program for teen parents

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By Nicole Lauer, nlauer@qconline.com

When Brittany Dykes and Renika Martin became pregnant at 16, they turned to Bethany for Children and Families for support. Now the program that taught them parenting skills, pushed them to pursue their education and helped them with life's essentials has been shuttered.

The teen parent services program, which aims to help teen parents of both genders earn their high school diploma or GED and become better parents, was shut down statewide July 1 because state funding was eliminated. This is one of many state-funded programs being eliminated because of Illinois' financial troubles.

Teen parents in search of similar services now will be sent to the Department of Human Services. Evena Wash, who last week lost her job running the Bethany program, said DHS case workers won't have time to offer the parenting advice and life guidance that was provided by the Bethany program.

Ms. Wash said she served about 100 teens per year. Teens attended workshops that covered topics such as birth control, career options and parenting. Ms. Wash kept tabs on the teens' school progress, connected them to community resources and helped them get necessities, such as baby clothing. The program assisted both volunteers and those who are required to attend in order to receive welfare assistance.

Ms. Dykes and Ms. Martin both turned to the program in 2008 and both credited the program for helping them get transportation and housing, helping them learn to be parents and pushing them to stay in school. Ms. Dykes, who has a son just shy of 2, graduated from Rockridge High School in 2010. Ms. Martin, who has a 3-year-old son and a 1-year-old son, expects to complete her GED this month.

The girls said the program was a second family to them and a key to their success.

"It benefited me so much, and it can benefit other people just as much, if not more," Ms. Dykes said.



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Photo: Nicole Lauer

The teen parent services program provided by Moline's Bethany for Children & Families shut down on July 1 due to the elimination of state funding. Rock Island residents Brittany Dykes, left, and Renika Martin, right, said the program encouraged them to attend school and helped them learn parenting skills.

Without a program like the one that helped her, Ms. Dykes said, young parents will not receive needed assistance to continue their education, they won't be able to get jobs, and they will have to rely on the state.

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