

## Teen Success Inc. helps teen moms in Valley

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Facing some of the nation's highest rates of teen pregnancy in the central San Joaquin Valley, [Teen Success, Inc.](#) is working hard to support teenage mothers and reduce those numbers.

Becky Morgan, a former Republican state senator, founded the nonprofit four years ago after doing similar work with [Planned Parenthood](#) for more than 20 years. She talked about the journey during an open house for Teen Success Inc. last week at [Fresno Barrios Unidos](#) in southeast Fresno.

"Often teenagers say, 'Why are you doing this? Were you a teen mom?' " Morgan says, "And I say, 'No, I was not a teen mom, but I grew up on a farm, I didn't have much, and people helped me and I wanted to give forward.' And what I saw was the valedictorian of my very small high school class was pregnant when she graduated and we've never heard from her since."

Kern County has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the country and other areas in the Central Valley are up there in the top 10.

Karin Kelley-Torregroza, executive director of Teen Success, Inc.

Looking out upon the faces of many teen mothers in the crowd, Morgan adds, "and I don't want these young women to disappear.

"I want them to have hope and to succeed and to have a richer life than they would have had without our help."

Over the past year, the nonprofit has helped 235 teen mothers in the Central Valley who gather once a week in small groups to learn about parenting, setting and achieving educational goals, and things like contraception and waiting to have another child until they are financially and emotionally ready.

In Fresno, 19-year-olds Salina Rios and Cecilia Morales are among those who have benefited from the program. Both have plans to go to college.

"It just keeps us motivated to do better for our children," Rios says.

"And it teaches us things that we never knew," Morales adds.

Morales says she didn't know about birth control, that condoms could rip, or that she could get pregnant as a young teen.

Rios wishes teachers had talked with her about the potential "consequences" of sex.

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Salina Rios, 19

"I think if we had that kind of information, of STDs and condoms, in detail, not just like, 'Oh, don't have sex,' I think it would have been more better," Rios says. "They just told you about puberty, guy parts and girl parts."

Facilitators with Teen Success Inc. also engage with schools to help promote comprehensive sex education.

Morales says the program is helping her learn how to be a good mom.

“The group taught me how to read to your child,” she says. “I didn’t know you were supposed to read to your child and they learn words and now my son loves reading books and, being 2, he knows a lot of words.”

I see a lot of people getting pregnant and I feel like they don’t know anything.

Cecilia Morales, 19

Across the state, Teen Success Inc. has 20 teen mom groups facilitated by seven partner organizations. There are 12 in the Central Valley, four in Fresno – three through Fresno Barrios Unidos and one through Planned Parenthood. The Fresno groups average between 12 and 14 girls.

“Our facilitators will get calls at 2 in the morning because our young women don’t have somewhere to live, because they are in abusive relationships,” says Socorro Santillan, executive director of Fresno Barrios Unidos. “A lot of them come from probation or foster care, so they are really young women who are struggling to just make ends meet.”

We all have troubles. Not every parent plans it. People assume you wanted a baby.

Salina Rios, 19

Teen Success Inc. provides the funding, training, curriculum and technical assistance for community facilitators to implement the program. The newest teen mom group, run by Fresno Barrios Unidos, started meeting last week at the [Big Red Church of Fresno](#) in the Tower District.

Teen Success Inc. is proud of their accomplishments over the past year. They say 94% of teen mothers who went through their program graduated from high school or are on track to graduate, compared to 40% of teen moms nationwide, and that only 3% have had a second pregnancy as a teen, compared to 18% nationally.

For teen mom Cynthia Rodriguez, 18, the best part of the program is something you can’t measure in numbers.

“They are really supportive,” she says, “As soon as I walk in the door it’s, ‘Hello!’ Smiles from left to right.”

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