Significant progress in reducing teen pregnancy and teen birth rates across the country has masked the fact that some communities still face high numbers of children having children. Texas is a perfect example of a state that has seen decreases in teen pregnancy and teen birth rates over the last 20 years, yet continues to have the 4th highest teen birth rate in the United States (U.S.) with many Texas counties exhibiting teen pregnancy and teen birth rates higher than the state averages. McLennan County is one area of the state not keeping up with decreases in teen birth rates at the national and state level, especially among youth of color.

In a diverse community like Greater Waco where the population 57% White, 15% Black, and 26% Hispanic, observed disparities in teen birth rates by race and ethnicity are especially troubling. Not only are teen pregnancy and teen birth rates high overall, youth of color in the county are significantly more likely to become teen parents than their White peers.

I can talk about all the things we’ve done in the past, but we still have a very high teen pregnancy rate.”

- key informant interview

The launch of the Prosper Waco initiative in 2015 added an even greater focus with the addition of a goal “to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy across all racial groups” as part of its women’s health portfolio.

Preventing teen pregnancy does not come without controversy. Across the country, conversations about focusing on abstinence as the sole strategy to prevent teen pregnancy or including access and information to contraception for sexually active teens are quite common. Despite the potential for gridlock and debate, when communities succeed in reducing teen pregnancy, it is most often because of a “both/and” approach not “either/or.” In Texas, a state where nearly half of high school students report they have had sex, it is clear a stronger abstinence message AND better access to contraception for those who are sexually active are BOTH needed. Rather than deepen a divide, this report is an attempt to provide a collective focus, positive energy, and a clear path forward - and to capitalize on the heightened awareness of a community eager to see change happen.
**Why It Matters**

Teen pregnancy and childbearing have well-documented correlations to other adverse social, educational, and economic outcomes throughout the lifespan of teen parents and their children. Nationally, only 51% of teen mothers will finish high school by age 22 and only 2% of young teen mothers (who are parents before age 18) will obtain a college degree by age 30. Children of teen mothers are more likely to experience adverse health outcomes at birth, more likely to be raised in single parent homes and grow up in poverty, and are less prepared to enter school ready to learn.

Nearly one-quarter of McLennan County's 250,000 residents are age 17 and younger. Much can be said about the health of a community by looking at the health of its children. Consider that one in five children in the county lives in concentrated poverty; one in three lives in a single-parent home; and nearly 500 youth are in foster care. Further, county birth records show babies born to teen mothers are more likely to be born premature, to have low birth weight, and to be born to mothers receiving late or no prenatal care. All of these outcomes are closely related to high teen birth rates.

Obviously there are a number of factors that contribute to the social and economic well-being of communities, but it is important to note that a community like Waco that has already declared a focus on improving the health, education, and financial stability of its citizens must also be focused on reducing the number of children having children.

**In Greater Waco**

- **388 babies born to mothers under age 20 in 2015**
- **72% of all teen births were to 18-19 year olds in 2015**
- **62% of women reported their first pregnancy was at age 21 or younger**
- **95% of community leaders feel that teen pregnancy prevention should be a higher priority**

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1. Texas Department of State Health Services
2. Waco-McLennan County Community Health Needs Assessment
3. Waco Foundation
4. National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

**Focusing Efforts**

While all areas of McLennan County have some level of need, determining where to invest the community’s limited resources is critical. Taking into consideration a number of risk factors (education, poverty, employment levels, and healthcare access), an index map was created.

A measured approach to targeting investments and understanding how risk factors overlap with high numbers of teen births (see blue triangles) and previously identified high priority zip codes (see bold blue outlines) will have a greater return.
Our Approach

Over the past 10 months, multiple sources of information, local expertise, and national insight were all gathered to develop a comprehensive view of the issue of teen pregnancy in McLennan County. The 1000 Feathers team spent many hours summarizing and synthesizing existing research on related issues in Waco, such as the 2016 Waco-McLennan County Community Health Needs Assessment and previous reports from Waco Foundation. In addition, we conducted interviews with community and organization leaders; participated in robust discussions and site visits to explore the healthcare delivery system; engaged in ongoing dialogue with leadership groups such as the Prosper Waco Women’s Health Work Group; and conducted an independent state-level policy analysis. Staff from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy were consulted regularly to ensure research and best practices from the field were incorporated.

We were particularly interested in the intersection of three sources of data: 1) Existing data and programs; 2) Voices of community members; and, 3) Best practices in the field. Where these sources overlapped led to the creation of three Priority Areas. Within these Priority Areas are 5 Recommendations, supported by a number of corresponding Action Steps.

The Path Forward

Together, the Priority Areas, Recommendations, and Action Steps present a comprehensive, integrated path forward for preventing teen pregnancy in McLennan County. Rather than a finished product, this document should be viewed as a strategic starting point as the environment young people are growing up in is constantly changing and communities must be willing to continue to develop and adapt strategies accordingly.

While presented as a list in this document, each of the Recommendations and Action Steps are intended to be seen as interrelated and complementary. It can be overwhelming to focus on each individual action step, but this is not a checklist. Rather, readers should focus on the five Recommendations and consider the action steps that follow to be supporting information. Remember, the more partners, programs, funders, and community members involved in the effort moving forward, the better the outcomes will be!
Create a Tiered Approach

Approaching the issue of teen pregnancy and childbearing in a comprehensive way requires different, yet complementary approaches based on the age of the population. State policies and local values suggest different approaches for younger teens (17 and under) and older teens (18-19), so there is a need for clarity and definition about the target population for all programmatic and outreach efforts.

Continue to support Waco ISD and surrounding school districts through training and capacity building efforts as a strategy to reach younger teens (17 and under), recognizing that schools are an essential, but insufficient condition of a successful effort.

Increase opportunities for parents to be engaged and learn about community resources, especially parents of younger teens. Only 33% of Waco ISD parents say they know where to get information to help them talk with their children about sex.

Going beyond abstinence and ensuring access to contraception is appropriate and necessary for older teens, many of whom are already sexually active. More than 70% of all teen births in McLennan County are to 18-19 year olds.

Implement a targeted education and outreach campaign including intensive digital campaigns and creative, grassroots strategies to deliver information and engage older teens directly in dialogue about their reproductive health needs. This is especially important given that many 18-19 year olds aren’t actively engaged in the school system and many still lack basic knowledge of contraception.

Capitalize on the faith community’s trusted reputation in McLennan County by engaging them in a meaningful way. Communities of faith can serve as excellent and efficient conveners of young people and their families. They are also a much needed partner and respected voice in the community.

Promote Health Equity

Like so many other health issues in McLennan County, rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing differ greatly based on geography, race, and ethnicity. Any successful effort to reduce teen pregnancy in the county should be viewed through a health equity lens, involve local voices in finding solutions, and include culturally-appropriate programming.

Create a working Community Advisory Board for teen pregnancy prevention and other similar health issues comprised of members of the communities of need. In this case, include representation from high-need zip codes 76704, 76705, 76706, 76707 (see map on p. 3), communities of color, and low-income communities to ensure that all voices remain engaged.

Reframe and rewrite the Prosper Waco 2020 women’s health goal related to decreasing the rate of teen pregnancy to be more deliberate about racial inequities.

Integrate an intensive, deliberate focus on health equity and working with diverse communities into the hiring and training practices for all medical and youth serving professionals in McLennan County, especially those providing reproductive healthcare.

Ensure staff of the newly launched Community Health Worker (CHW) Program are able to make connections and referrals to reproductive healthcare facilities. CHWs are actively being placed in zip codes (76704, 76705, 76706, 76707), which account for 53% of all teen births in the county.
**Program Delivery System**

**Improve Access to Reproductive Healthcare**

In McLennan County, accessing reproductive healthcare and contraception can be difficult, and navigating the healthcare delivery system is complicated. The system is fragmented, not well marketed or reachable, and as a general rule, not very “teen friendly.”

Ensure all providers offer comprehensive contraceptive counseling and the full range of contraceptive methods (including long-acting methods) for free or at low-cost OR have a mechanism in place to refer to those that do. This should include a direct referral mechanism from the health department for any teens who receive pregnancy or STD testing.

Initiate a provider incentive system to make youth under 20 seeking reproductive health services a priority population (e.g., increased access and priority scheduling). This may require assisting Family Health Center with their planned centralized appointment system.

Design and implement a targeted, consumer focused marketing campaign to assist with the visibility of providers that accept the Texas Family Planning Program and/or Title X funding. Messaging about where and how youth can access contraception in McLennan County is currently non-existent.

Implement strategies within each of McLennan County’s two hospital systems that allow for immediate postpartum insertion of long-acting reversible contraception. Texas law allows for and provides reimbursement for such services, but logistical and cost barriers exist locally.

Create a local, privately funded solution to help offset the cost of purchasing long-acting reversible contraceptive devices for both providers and patients. Given uncertainties in federal (Affordable Care Act) and state (Texas Healthy Women, Texas Family Planning Program) policy, a local solution would be timely.

**Invest in Training & Capacity Building**

The quality and continuity of reproductive healthcare in McLennan County varies across healthcare centers. Investing in and instituting a universal training program for those who have high contact with young people, those providing reproductive health services to sexually active youth, and those already engaged with pregnant and parenting teens would have a high return.

Design and implement a comprehensive, multi-faceted training program for medical sites in the community based on National Quality Family Planning Guidelines. Training should include mandatory topics for providers (method insertion, contraceptive counseling, minor consent laws), but also for administration and “front of house” staff (teen friendly services, billing and coding, etc.)

Train all medical providers, including staff and nurses at the Health Department, to utilize the One Key Question strategy (“Would you like to become pregnant in the next year?”) and be familiar with referral protocols for all responses. The 2016 Waco-McLennan County Community Health Needs Assessment indicates that 74% of residents 18-25 years old are not using any form of birth control.

Provide training on topics related to teen pregnancy prevention for all professionals (e.g., community health workers, community based organizations, faith communities, schools, college campuses) who interact with populations of youth and their families. At minimum, all should be trained on trauma informed care, being an “Askable Adult,” and making referrals.

Ensure training for those working with pregnant and parenting teens to incorporate prevention of short-interval repeat pregnancies, specifically by helping their clients access contraception. Many such programs provide parenting and life skills without ever explicitly discussing contraceptive options.
Implementation Strategies

Ensure Approach is Holistic, Integrated, & Focused

In order to effectively address the complex issues of teen pregnancy and childbearing, a holistic and comprehensive approach is needed. While not every member of the community will feel comfortable with every organization’s approach, it is important to recognize that an entire continuum of strategies is necessary to achieve success. Given that there are already so many initiatives happening in McLennan County, capitalizing on strengths, increasing collaboration and connections, and putting into place opportunities to measure the collective impact are necessary.

Begin scaling school-based sex education efforts within Waco ISD and to the other 17 districts in McLennan County. Continued expansion of school-based sex education programs across each of the 18 school districts is an important goal. Waco ISD can serve as a great model to its peer districts in the county while also continuing to refine and expand its own programming.

Continue to build up and support successful community-based organizations, many of which reach large numbers of youth and provide countless referral opportunities (e.g., Communities in Schools, YMCA, Mission Waco, Waco CDC, Care Net, VOICE, Family Abuse Center). Creating robust referral networks and integrating these organizations into ongoing conversation about healthcare access is essential, yet neither of these are happening currently on a consistent basis.

Integrate Results Based Accountability and shared measures into planning, funding, and evaluation efforts. There is a dramatic lack of data among healthcare providers and those who are potential referral sources. It is impossible to manage and change what is not currently measured.

Improve collaboration and communication between programs in the county actively serving pregnant and parenting teens (e.g., Nurse Family Partnership, Care Net, Parents as Teachers, Waco ISD Parenting Education Program, etc.). Because Texas has the highest rate of repeat teen pregnancy in the country, this is a critically important strategy.

Increase interventions and outreach on college campuses by incorporating information about pregnancy prevention into student support services including orientation(s), first-year programming, and other on-campus social gatherings. More than 35,000 students are enrolled in McLennan County institutions of higher education (Baylor, MCC, TSTC). Approximately 7,000 of these students live on campus, many of whom are 18-19 years old.

Determine a local definition for “safety net providers,” hold providers accountable to the defined standard, and actively promote those who provide low-cost availability to the full range of contraceptive methods without barriers. Stark differences exist related to the cost, access, and confidentiality of reproductive health services across multiple payer sources including Medicaid, Healthy Texas Women, Texas Family Planning Program, Title X, and self-pay.

Messaging, communication, and coordination around a teen pregnancy prevention initiative must be inclusive of all programs and services available. Current prevention efforts in the county are numerous and in many cases successful, but are on the whole disconnected, difficult to measure collectively, and not in communication with each other. As a result, an overall initiative is hard to sustain over time and nearly impossible to take to scale.

Establish a neutral convener and leadership organization to oversee program implementation and coordination. The process of managing and tracking the recommendations and action steps in this document is a full-time job, and a position within an appropriate community-based agency should be created accordingly.
About This Project

1000 Feathers was established to help bridge the divide between vision and strategy and to help lead communities, organizations, and philanthropists to results. The work of 1000 Feathers is based on the premise that a strong vision combined with thoughtful strategy is the only path to achieving measurable change. Our expert team has worked across the country with nonprofit, social service organizations, and those who fund them - helping them to maximize return on investments and achieve greater impact in the communities they serve.

Conversations between 1000 Feathers and Waco Foundation began in fall 2016. Our shared interest has always been to create a product that would speak to multiple audiences and ensure the community would have a clear path forward for future efforts. We recognized the approach didn’t have to “start from scratch,” but rather built on the many strengths and successes in the community, and incorporated best practices from successful teen pregnancy prevention initiatives from around the country. This summary report was commissioned by Waco Foundation and completed with substantial assistance from the team at Prosper Waco, with a special thanks to Brittany Fitz whose assistance with data gathering and mapping has been invaluable.

Along with this report will come a number of conversations throughout McLennan County with community members, service organizations, healthcare providers, and those who fund them. This document is geared towards action – not just another report that sits on the shelf. An ongoing commitment from Waco Foundation, the Prosper Waco initiative, additional funders and leaders in the community will be key to moving this conversation forward. Most importantly, a commitment is needed from YOU, the members of the Greater Waco Community, without whom the long-term, systemic, sustainable change needed will not be possible.