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### Focusing on Best Babies: INMED LA Case Manager Helps Teen Moms Exceed Expectations

**Ashburn, Virginia (October 19, 2009)** — Franklin Jr.'s mother watched with one eye on him and another on her guests as the two year old, his long, curly black hair crowning a joyful and spirited smile, sprinted back and forth between his ball and SpongeBob on TV.

Sitting on the couch in her Lynwood apartment, Bianca is at the ready for her son to run into her arms to periodically hide from the strangers. She gives him a kiss on the head, asks him to go watch more of SpongeBob, and without skipping a beat resumes talking about her experience of being a teenage mom.

Today, things are much different for Bianca than they were two years ago when, at the age of 16, she fought with others, became pregnant and dropped out of high school. Ultimately, she returned and graduated from high school, and the simple fact that she is now surrounded by college applications and health care insurance forms sheds more than hints to just how far she has come in those two years.

"I want to have a good life and give him everything he needs," Bianca says, glancing over at the toddler. She then admits that few of her recent accomplishments, such as getting her driver's license after three attempts or being placed on the waiting list at an area college, would have been possible without the help of her mom or other people such as Emily Flores.

As she often has for Bianca and other teen moms, Flores goes beyond merely explaining the forms that need to be filled out but dotingly commands that the work be finished.

A case manager with INMED Partnerships for Children in Los Angeles, Flores has worked with teen moms or expecting teens for nearly 11 years, the last five of which have been through a program administered by the South LA Best Babies Collaborative, a network of local medical and social service providers working to promote healthier pregnancies, birth outcomes and care for women who previously experienced an adverse birth outcome, all in high-risk communities.

In her years with INMED's MotherNet LA program, Flores has worked with roughly 200 teen moms,

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nearly half of whom suffer from domestic violence, sexual abuse or addiction. Getting calls in the middle of the night or during the weekends, attending court sessions or navigating the Department of Children and Family Services are not uncommon to Flores' life. Best Babies addresses these issues through support and group sessions for domestic violence and chemical dependency while also focusing on childhood development, nutrition, breastfeeding and care for chronic health issues such as diabetes and asthma.

The work can take its emotional toll, but Flores says watching the young mothers secure independence from dangerous relationships or even from public aid is enough incentive to persevere. Most of the teens she works with do complete the two-year program, having earned their high school diploma or equivalent, enrolling in college, and avoiding a second pregnancy until they are more secure and ready.

"When I see the outcomes, when I see them doing things on their own without having to have their hands held, when I see them getting involved in college, when I know they are doing what they can to give their children the best life possible, that's my reward," Flores says.

According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, the 2007 birth rate to girls ages 15 to 19 was 74 per 1,000 females in the county's Service Planning Area 6, one of eight zones used by the department to monitor public health issues. SPA 6 runs south from the I-10 to Compton and Paramount and is considered among the more depressed zones in the county.

In comparison, the national teen birth rate was 41.9 per 1,000.

Teenage pregnancy and childbearing are ongoing public concerns, says the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and are the focus of considerable public policy debate. Babies born to teenage mothers are at elevated risk of poor birth outcomes, including higher rates of low birth weight, preterm birth and death in infancy. The limited educational, social, and financial resources available to teenage mothers add to their higher risk profile. A recent study found that the public costs of teenage childbearing in the United States are about \$9.1 billion annually, as the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics reported in its Jan. 7, 2009 publication, National Vital Statistics Reports.

A large focus of the Best Babies Collaborative, Flores said, is to counsel clients on preventing repeat pregnancies. While research shows that nearly one in five teenagers in the United States who experiences a premarital pregnancy will become pregnant again within one year, and that more than 31 percent of these mothers will have a repeat pregnancy during their teen years, the same cannot be said for Flores' clients.

In 2008, for example, none of the 30 clients Flores worked with had become pregnant within two years of their last pregnancy. Other successes that year include:

- 100 percent of pregnant women and teens received adequate or better prenatal care from the time they enrolled in MotherNet program, compared to about 12 percent of women in SPA 6 who received late or no prenatal care in 2007,
- 100 percent of children from 0 to 17 years old had health coverage and a medical home, compared to about 20 percent of children in SPA 6 who have difficulty accessing medical care, the highest rate in Los Angeles County, as well as 9.7 percent who are uninsured,
- 100 percent of children remained up to date on their immunizations, compared to 80 percent of children countywide who have completed the recommended series of immunizations for their ages.

Bianca, with Flores nearby, admits she had no idea of the many responsibilities expected of a new mother when she first met Flores at a Cal-Safe school in Compton, administered by the California Department of Education for expecting or parenting students. Bianca graduated from the high school equivalency program last October.



about a day ago



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"Any time I needed something I would call her, and I could call her for anything. She was always there," Bianca said. "She would tell me what to do because I was not always sure. Sometimes I was like, 'I really don't want to do this.' But she would make sure that I did because it was in my and Franklin's best interest."

Parental tasks such as getting her son immunized or enrolling him in a health insurance plan were things Bianca said she was unaware of having to do, or how to do, before she and Flores met. At that time, too, she admits, she was "just squeaking by" in the Cal-Safe program.

All that changed when Flores entered her life. As a result, her dreams of becoming a nurse or a law enforcement officer are turning into reality, step by step. And today, she is sharing her experiences with other teen moms in the Cal-Safe program under Flores' tutelage.

"Having Franklin really made me focus, but I couldn't have done it without her," Bianca said as she and Flores returned their attention to the college admission forms. "I'm excited to start school."

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