

Spotlight on Kathleen Kurtz: 35 years of helping teen moms be great parents

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Read how a move to Rockford turned into a 35-year career helping teen parents.

In the mid-1980s, teenage pregnancy was a growing problem. In 1987, when Kathleen Kurtz saw a job opportunity in Rockford to help support teen mothers to be the best parents possible, she was intrigued. She was moving to Rockford for the first time to be close to her now-husband and wanted a job in her new community where she could make a difference.

“At the time, it was a really small program with just two of us and our caseloads continued to skyrocket. It felt a little like the Wild West working with a small budget and team, but it was also wonderful to serve new moms with resources, connections to services, and the tools to be good parents,” says Kurtz.

Fast forward 35 years later, and Kurtz is the manager of Teen Family Support and the program has grown in size, scope, and funding. What has not changed is Kurtz’s passion for the mission. Today, Teen Family Support provides home visits with family support workers that help mothers prepare for a healthy pregnancy, labor, delivery, and early parenthood, as well as connect family members to education, employment, daycare centers and much more. They also provide doula services.

While teen pregnancy rates have declined since the 80s, the work of Teen Family Support is still needed and in demand. Many Illinois teen parents and young parents with children struggle to pursue their education while also raising a new baby. The average pregnant teen completes 0.7 to 2 fewer years of school compared to their classmates. Only half of teen mothers get a high school diploma by age 22, and less than 2% earn a college degree by age 30. Connecting young parents to continued education, employment and other such services is a hallmark of the program.

While teen pregnancy rates have fallen, Kurtz sees other problems more often, such as addiction, homelessness, mental illness, and domestic violence. “It’s our job to help our families connect with the resources and community services they need to be safe and well,” she explains. “We’ve expanded to serve young mothers beyond the teenage years to age 25, as well as fathers and the extended family. We now take a more whole family approach.”

Not only is Kurtz the program manager for Teen Family Support, but she also leads Family Support Services, which provides families with children who have disabilities with services, supports, activities, and resources.

Kurtz’s contributions are appreciated by so many, especially Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford President and CEO Sara Ray Hallman. “Kathleen has provided outstanding services to literally thousands of families, built programs from the ground up, maintained strong, collaborative relationships with funders and partners, and hired, mentored, and grown outstanding talent—some of whom now lead programs at Easterseals. We are deeply grateful to Kathleen for her relentless service and commitment and for the kind, empathetic, and loving approach she brings to her work.”

Kurtz has spent her entire career devoted to serving others and plans to continue working for Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford until the day she retires.

"I can't imagine doing anything else and I couldn't ask for a better agency to work for. Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford continues to grow and evolve to better serve our communities and our staff. I have been unbelievably supported in my career and given continuous learning and leadership opportunities. I feel so blessed that I was hired way back in 1987."