

LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES IMPLEMENTS THE RESOURCES & EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENTS CHOOSING HEALTHY BEHAVIORS (REACH) PROGRAM

NEEDS OF SOUTH DAKOTA YOUTH

The choices young people make during adolescence can shape the course of their lives. Yet many youth face challenges that make healthy decision-making difficult, including peer pressure, unstable family situations, trauma, limited access to trusted adults, and misinformation about relationships and sexual health.

In South Dakota, these challenges are reflected in public health trends. The state's teen birth rate remains higher than the national average, and South Dakota continues to experience some of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the nation.

2023 Teen birth rate

Live births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19

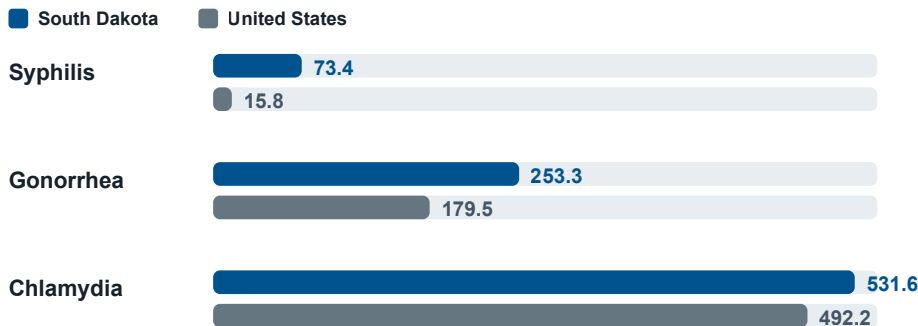


● South Dakota's rate was significantly higher than the national rate.

In 2023, the state's teen birth rate among females ages 15 to 19 years was 16.6 (live births per 1,000 females), which is significantly higher than the national teen birth rate of 13.1 (births per 1,000 women).^{1,2}

2024 Reported sexually transmitted infection rates

Rate per 100,000 population



● In 2024, South Dakota reported the highest syphilis rate in the nation.

These statistics represent more than numbers – they represent young people whose futures may be impacted by decisions made without the knowledge, skills, or support they need. Recognizing this, the South Dakota Department of Health (SD DOH) partnered with Lutheran Social Services (LSS) to implement evidence-based education and prevention programming that helps adolescents make informed decisions and build healthy relationships.

HELPING ADOLESCENTS CHOOSE HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

Through the federally funded Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) grant administered by the SD DOH Office of Lifespan Health, LSS developed and implemented the Resources & Education for Adolescents Choosing Healthy Behaviors (REACH) program.



REACH provides evidence-based education for youth ages 10–19 who may be at increased risk for unhealthy behaviors. The program focuses on healthy relationships, pregnancy prevention, STI prevention, decision-making skills, peer pressure resistance, and other protective behaviors that support adolescent well-being. The REACH program utilizes three evidence-based curricula, including Teen Outreach Program (TOP), Motivating Adolescents to Reduce Sexual Risk (MARS), and Families Talking Together (FTT). LSS REACH coordinators work closely with partner sites to determine which curriculum best fits the needs of the youth being served.

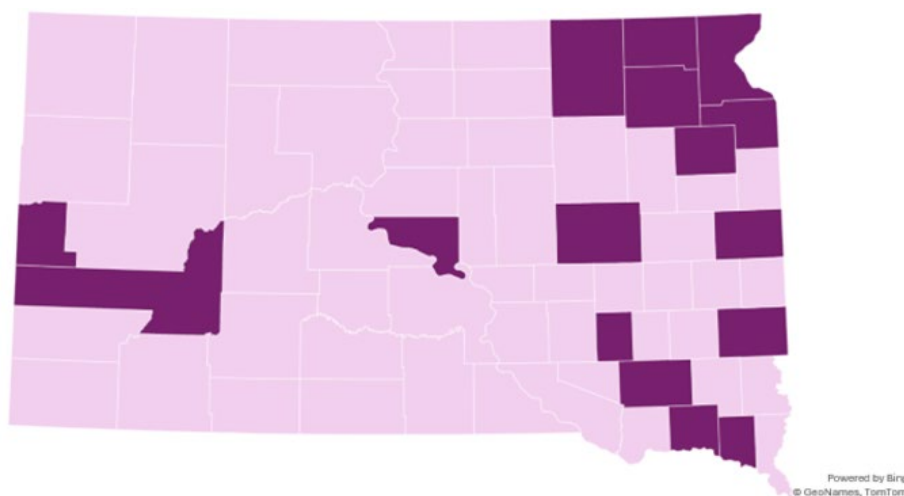
In addition to directly facilitating classes, LSS REACH coordinators provide Training of Facilitators instruction to community partners, including public health nurses, school counselors, teachers, and youth-serving professionals. This train-the-trainer approach helps expand local capacity and increase access to programming across the state. LSS REACH coordinators provide ongoing oversight and support throughout implementation.

STATEWIDE REACH, LOCAL IMPACT

Since first receiving PREP funding in 2012, LSS has expanded REACH programming across South Dakota through partnerships with organizations serving vulnerable youth. What began primarily in residential treatment settings now reaches adolescents in juvenile detention centers, community organizations, Boys and Girls Clubs, and additional youth-serving agencies.

Each year, an average of 40 facilitators are trained to deliver REACH programming, reaching more than 250 youth and young adults across South Dakota. Today, LSS partners with nearly 30 sites across 16 South Dakota counties to provide healthy relationship education.

Counties with Trained REACH Facilitators



The growing number of partner sites reflects both the need for adolescent education and the value partners place on REACH. Facilitators consistently report high levels of engagement among participants. Youth actively participate in discussions and frequently submit anonymous questions at the end of sessions; the questions are those they don't feel comfortable asking elsewhere. These interactions demonstrate the importance of providing trusted, evidence-based education in a safe and supportive environment.

Program surveys exhibit increases in participant knowledge and understanding, indicating that REACH is helping to equip youth with the tools they need to make informed choices and build healthy relationships.

As REACH continues to grow, LSS remains committed to ensuring South Dakota adolescents have access to the education, support, and life skills they need to thrive.

The impact of these efforts can be seen in statewide outcomes. In 2020, South Dakota Healthy Relationships programs, including the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), established a five-year State Performance Measure (SPM) goal to increase the percentage of youth ages 10–19 who reported they would talk to a trusted adult if someone they were dating or going out with made them uncomfortable, hurt them, or pressured them to do something they did not want to do. The baseline rate was 45.1%, with a target of 60.4% by 2025. Through the continued implementation of evidence-based healthy relationship education and positive youth development programming, the goal was achieved and exceeded. In 2025, 61.0% of participating youth reported they would seek support from a trusted adult in these situations, surpassing the established five-year target.

While these outcomes demonstrate the impact of REACH programming, they have not come without challenges. Like many community-based programs, REACH has experienced staff turnover among partner organizations and limited time availability for programming within some facilities. These experiences have reinforced the importance of maintaining a strong network of trained facilitators, providing ongoing support to partner sites, and selecting curricula that fit the unique needs and constraints of each setting.

By continuing to strengthen partnerships and expand access to evidence-based education, REACH will help more South Dakota youth gain the knowledge, confidence, and skills needed to make healthy decisions and build brighter futures.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON REACH PROGRAMMING, PLEASE CONTACT

Roslyn Stevenson, Program Director, at 605-496-8691 or ILS-REACH@LssSD.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON SD DOH HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS, PLEASE CONTACT

Sarah Barclay, Healthy Relationships Program Manager, at sarah.barclay@state.sd.us.



SOURCES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics, Stats of the States. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/state-stats/births/teen-births.html>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics, Teen Births. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/teen-births.htm>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. STI Surveillance 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/sti-statistics/media/pdfs/2024/10/2023-STD-Surveillance-State-Ranking-Tables.pdf>
4. Empowering Youth Through REACH. Retrieved from: <https://lsssd.org/what-we-do/independent-living-services/reach.html>