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Sacona Mayo, 21, enjoys a close relationship with her son Isis, 7 months, as well as the peace of mind that comes from knowing she can count on Our Family in tough times — like when her fiancé recently deserted her. **James S. Wood / arizona daily star**

## **\$2M federal grant will help pregnant teens, young moms**

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A Tucson social-service agency has won a federal grant for nearly \$2 million over five years to provide medical care, counseling and other support to pregnant teens and teenage parents.

Our Family will focus its effort on girls ages 13 to 17 who live within the 85705 ZIP code, which includes parts of the Flowing Wells and Amphitheater school districts.

Girls 12 to 18 in those districts gave birth to 226 babies in 2004. That ranks them among the 22 school districts in the state with the highest incidence of teen births, according to the Arizona Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting.

Our Family will enroll at least 80 pregnant girls and their babies — and when possible, their boyfriends or husbands and their parents — each year over the five years of the project. Teen Outreach Pregnancy Services will connect girls to prenatal care, and the Pima Prevention Partnership will track how well the project reaches its goals.

"Our main goal is to make sure the girls who are having babies in the '05 ZIP code are having healthy babies and getting the skills they need as young parents," said Laurie Mazerbo, who heads Our Family's Teens in Transition program.

"Our other big goal is to reduce the number of repeat pregnancies," she said. "Your ability to graduate from high school and earn a livable wage really goes down when you're a teen who gets pregnant a second time."

Sacona Mayo knows all about that, and so does Damaris Linares. Both are single mothers in their 20s, and both have benefited from programs offered by Our Family and its predecessor agencies, Our Town and the Family Counseling Agency, which merged in late 2005.

Mayo, 21, lives in an apartment with her son, Isaiah, 4, and her daughter, Isis, 7 months. Our Family pays her rent. Her fiancé lived there too, until a couple of weeks ago.

"He just like up and left. I came home from work and he was gone," Mayo said. A few days later, she got a message on her cell phone: "Just to let you know, I'm in Ohio."

Mayo panicked at first, but Mazerbo and others with Our Family assured her that they would help her through.

"They were like: 'Calm down. You're strong. We'll help you,' " Mayo said. "I felt stuck. I thought, 'How am I going to pay the bills?' But they helped me." It wasn't the first hard time Mayo has faced. She dropped out of Santa Rita High School at age 16 and gave birth to Isaiah when she was 17. She and her family have been homeless or staying with friends, or sometimes with her mother, for most of the last five years.

Mayo is studying to get her high school equivalency degree by summer so she can start classes at Pima Community College in the fall and eventually become a social worker.

"I feel more like what I want to do is going to be accomplished," Mayo said. Linares, 25, is the mother of 7-year-old Alejandro, born the year after she graduated from Pueblo Magnet High School. That was her first triumph over adversity.

She first sought help from the Family Counseling Agency when she was 15 and homeless. She left her family to escape abuse, then lived with a high school friend and her friend's parents for two years until she graduated.

Linares now works for Our Family as a case manager with Mazerbo's program. She expects to get a bachelor's degree from the University of Phoenix next fall, then plans to pursue a master's degree in psychology. She will work closely with teens in the new federal grant project, scheduled to get under way by May.

"Laurie (Mazerbo) tells me: 'You've gone through this. You know what it takes.' And I feel actually grateful about that," Linares said. "When you're a teenager and you're pregnant and homeless, you're lonely. You don't know what to do. I can say to them, 'This isn't the way your parents did it. But there are some of us who have gone through it and understand your doubts and stresses.' "

Our Family will receive \$375,000 a year for five years from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which awarded seven such grants this year through its Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs. Each grant funds a demonstration project that will evaluate different approaches to helping teens have healthy pregnancies and healthy babies, and delay second pregnancies until they are older and financially and emotionally secure, said Director Johanna Nestor of the pregnancy programs office.

Her office has funded similar projects since 1981, Nestor said. "There have been some great outcomes from these programs" — typically higher prenatal-care rates and high school graduation rates, she said.

Our Family served more than 29,000 clients in the fiscal year that ended June 30. Seventy percent of those were ages 13 to 21. Many of the agency's programs target seniors, the disabled and the homeless.