



## Investing in Girls in the Washington Region

### Washington Area Women's Foundation

Washington Area Women's Foundation's mission is to mobilize our community to ensure that economically vulnerable women and girls in the Washington region have the resources they need to thrive.

In 2005, The Women's Foundation launched Stepping Stones, a multi-year, regional initiative focused on building the economic security of low-income women and girls. Grant investments support key issues identified in our *Portrait Project* research as pivotal to economic security: jobs and career readiness, financial education and wealth creation opportunities, and quality early care and education.

Historically, Stepping Stones investments have focused on building the economic security of low-income women – and particularly female-headed households, which research has shown are the most economically vulnerable families in our community. However, for many women and girls in our region, poverty is multigenerational. The Women's Foundation recently expanded its target population to take a life cycle approach, and now includes all women and girls under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Through our Stepping Stones work, the Foundation then launched a new strategy in 2013 for investing in our community's girls.

### A Snapshot of the Issue

As young girls develop into women, there are clear and critical markers that can support or challenge their future economic security. Adolescence is an important opportunity to build foundational skills, encourage positive choices, and reinforce girls' health and well-being so that they can attain economic security in adulthood.

Key goals for investing in girls are to:

➤ Empower girls as social change agents

Girls are an asset to our community, and have the potential to shape and lead change in their families and neighborhoods. Girls should be encouraged to advocate for themselves, for others, and to mobilize their communities in meaningful ways. By supporting the positive development of girls, we can break the cycle of generational poverty, and build racial and gender equity in our region.

➤ Support high school completion

As of 2008, one in ten girls in the region did not complete high school. For girls of color in our region, the disparities are glaring: while 6 percent of white girls did not complete high school, 37 percent of Latina girls, 14 percent of Asian girls, and 12 percent of African American girls did not complete high school.<sup>i</sup>

High school graduation is a critical determinant of economic security, affecting long-term earning potential. By 2018, it is projected that only 8 percent of job openings in Maryland, and 9 percent of job openings in DC and Virginia, will be available for high school dropouts.<sup>ii</sup> With a high school diploma, workers can earn 82 percent more than those who did not complete high school.<sup>iii</sup>

➤ Encourage positive choices that decrease risky behavior and early pregnancy, and increase health and well-being

Girls who become teen parents are more likely to drop out of school, earn less, and live in poverty. Only 40 percent of teen mothers are likely to have graduated from high school and just 2 percent of girls who have children before age 18 finish college by age 30.<sup>iv</sup>

While teen pregnancy rates are dropping nationally and in the region, rates in parts of the region remain some of the highest in the country. Furthermore, despite reductions in the teen pregnancy *rate*, the overall number of teen births remains stubbornly high in some communities. For example, in 2011 in the District, 58% of all births to teens aged 15-19 were in Wards 7 and 8.<sup>v</sup>

## Our Approach

In our research, we found a dearth of programs focused on girls in general – and especially girls in middle school – as well as a lack of data or research on issues facing girls. This critical gap made it clear that it was important to target our initial investments to **focus on middle school aged girls**.

To translate the key goals for investing in girls:

- For middle school aged girls, supporting high school completion in the long-term means supporting academic readiness, encouraging school engagement, providing opportunities for college and career exposure, and developing 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and competencies that help girls build a positive vision for their futures and ensure that they are prepared for tomorrow's economy.
- For middle school aged girls, encouraging positive choices that decrease risky behavior and early pregnancy means providing leadership development opportunities that build a positive sense of self, fostering relationships with parents and caring adults that provide support and guidance, and increasing access to comprehensive sex education. Additionally, a focus on girls' health and well-being includes good nutrition, physical exercise, and the importance of positive body image.

Furthermore, beyond supporting girls alone, The Women's Foundation asserts that there is a need for two-generation strategies – that is, strategies that simultaneously work to improve the economic security of girls and their mothers together. Despite promising research that two-generation programs and policies can help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, our research could not identify any significant program that **combines a two-generation approach with an intentional effort to reach the critical demographic of middle school girls**. Through a cohort model – working with both girls and their mothers or female caregivers – The Foundation seeks to spark new strategies, support programs bringing a gender lens to this work, and understand changes in positive outcomes and economic security that exceed isolated work with youth or their parents.

Finally, The Women's Foundation will begin its investments with a **targeted place-based approach, focused on Washington, DC and Prince George's County, Maryland**. While the Foundation recognizes significant poverty rates in every jurisdiction in our region, this narrow geography will allow for an initial focus on neighborhoods with the greatest density of girls and women in need, and allow for tailored, deep work within each community.

## For More Information

Contact Program Officer Lauren Stillwell at [lstillwell@wawf.org](mailto:lstillwell@wawf.org) or 202.347.7737.

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<sup>i</sup> *2010 Portrait of Women & Girls in the Washington Metropolitan Area*. Washington Area Women's Foundation. 2010. PDF File. Web. 24 Sep 2013. <[http://thewomensfoundation.org/wp-content/themes/wawf/images/Portrait\\_Project\\_2010\\_Complete\\_Report.pdf](http://thewomensfoundation.org/wp-content/themes/wawf/images/Portrait_Project_2010_Complete_Report.pdf)>.

<sup>ii</sup> Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, and John Strohl. *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, June 2010. PDF File. p. 121-122. Web. 24 Sep 2013. <<http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/FullReport.pdf>>.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>iv</sup> Shuger, Lisa. *Teen Pregnancy and High School Dropout: What Communities are Doing to Address These Issues*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and America's Promise Alliance, 2012. ASHX file. p. 1. Web. 24 Sep 2013. <[http://www.americaspromise.org/News-and-Events/News-and-Features/2012-News/June/~/\\_media/Files/Resources/teen-pregnancy-and-hs-dropout-print.ashx](http://www.americaspromise.org/News-and-Events/News-and-Features/2012-News/June/~/_media/Files/Resources/teen-pregnancy-and-hs-dropout-print.ashx)>.

<sup>v</sup> "Data." DC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, n.d. Web. 24 Sep 2013. <[http://www.dccampaign.org/#!\\_\\_data](http://www.dccampaign.org/#!__data)>.