

An Interview with State Rep. Jack Thompson
By Tony Norris

State Representative Jack Thompson, a Manchester Democrat, has been in the legislative forefront of teen pregnancy prevention in Connecticut for many years. As an early advocate, Representative Thompson has witnessed the evolution of the Legislature's collective support for teen pregnancy prevention programs. The Connecticut Teen Pregnancy Prevention Web Site interviewed him recently in his office at the State Capitol.



Norris: How long have you represented Manchester in the Connecticut House of Representatives?

Rep. Thompson: Fourteen years.

Norris: How did you get started in political life?

Rep. Thompson: I was the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Manchester in the early 1970s. I served three terms on the Manchester Board of Directors, which is our town council. I got out of elected office after that and stayed out until I came back here in 1986.

Norris: Are you from Manchester originally?

Rep. Thompson: I'm from Staten Island, New York, part of Richmond. I grew up there and joined the Marines right out of high school in 1950, not a good time to join the Marines. Six months later I was on my way to Korea and served there for a year. I was discharged as a corporal and was only 19 at the time, and had served not quite two years. I had an indefinite enlistment. They were doing that at the time, so long as they needed us.

Then I went to St. Michael's College in Vermont and played basketball and wound up being a full-time student. I hurt my leg up there. In college, I met my wife who was from Burlington, Vermont. We came down here so I could go to graduate school at the University of Connecticut in 1956 and here I am.

Norris: What are your degrees in?

Rep. Thompson: Political Science.

Norris: Did you think you would go into politics?

Rep. Thompson: No, I didn't. My father was involved in politics in New York, but I didn't have any interest in it, although I did help him out around election time. He was a ward leader and vice-chair of the Richmond Democratic Committee. But I really didn't have any interest in running for office.

Norris: So you went to graduate school and then settled in Connecticut.

Rep. Thompson: First we lived in Harwinton, then we moved to Colchester, then East Hartford and then to Manchester. We've been in Manchester almost forty years now.

Norris: So what was it that finally got you to run for office?

Rep. Thompson: Actually, I guess I always had some interest in politics in college. I was into sports in a big way in high school and even after I got out of high school. I wasn't really interested in running for office. A friend of mine, my roommate and best man at my wedding, a fellow named Donald G. Cook, went into the Marines after college. He became an officer and then went to California to study languages. He was a linguist and they taught him Chinese. He went to Hawaii where he headed up an intelligence unit. Then he was sent to Vietnam in December of 1964. He was captured on New Year's Eve in 1964. He died in captivity and won the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously. His wife later contacted me and was very interested in finding out exactly what happened to Don.

At that time, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were not releasing very much information, so I became involved in that effort. I wrote my senators and congressmen and got people to sign petitions and all of that. Joe Duffy came along in 1970 and waged an anti-war campaign for the U.S. Senate. I got involved in Joe's campaign and met some people from Manchester who then asked me to run for local office and I did. Don died in 1968 and we didn't find out until 1972. There was a state department official whom I actually met, who was with Don in the camp; he was there seven years, the poor guy. He and others came out and told about Don's heroism and he received the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously. His wife, Loretta, received it in 1972 or 1973. For me, it was kind of a tortured way into politics.

But the people I met in that effort were active in the local Democratic party and they got me interested and asked me to run. And I ran. The first time I ran, I was elected Mayor. In Manchester, we have a council/manager form of government, so the highest vote getter of the majority party becomes the Mayor.

Norris: That's kind of unusual, running for office for the first time and being the top vote getter...

Rep. Thompson: Yeah, it was...maybe that tells you something about politics in those days...

Norris: ...or it tells me something about you.

Rep. Thompson: It was a lot of fun; politics was a lot of fun in those days. We even had a fight song, a lot of volunteers...sixty percent of the eligible voters voted. Now we're down to thirty, thirty-three or thirty-four percent. It'll probably be higher this year with the presidential election.

Norris: You were an early supporter of teen pregnancy prevention programs, before anyone was really talking about it. What led you to this issue?

Rep. Thompson: I was on the Human Services Committee, which was one of my assignments when I was a freshman, Human Services, Environment and Appropriations. I got involved in the Human Services Subcommittee on Appropriations and one of our responsibilities was to fund programs like teen pregnancy prevention. I must admit I initially got involved in school breakfast programs for youngsters. I found it hard to accept that we weren't funding that at a higher level because it was such a good investment. For the state it was a very minor investment, although it triggered some federal funds.



So I got interested in that and then I met some anti-hunger people who got me involved with young people who were having babies and were still in school. One thing that helped them survive was the school breakfast program and the school lunch program. I got involved in issues affecting single parents.

At the time, State Rep. Mary Mushinsky was right next door to me. She was one of my colleagues on the Environment Committee and she was a strong advocate for teen pregnancy prevention programs.

She mentored me on that subject and I got to know some of the people who were working in the field, and they all seemed to be swimming upstream. It was a more serious problem then than it is now, although it's still a very serious problem.

I got interested in children's health care and expansion of health care access to children and through that I learned about successful programs. France, for example. France has a very good health care program for children and families. Different culture, but nevertheless, their teen pregnancy problem was a fraction of ours, like one-seventh at the time. I thought that it was due to their welcoming children into their health care system, pre-natal, post-natal care, investing in children, investing in childcare, investing in health care. I thought that should be a model we ought to follow, that we should expand health care for young people and children and do everything we can to educate kids.

Mary had some startling statistics, like eighty percent of teenage mothers would eventually be living in poverty. It was way off the charts. It just seemed to me to be a very serious problem and there were very few people working on it at the time. There was another legislator, Bob Keeley from Bridgeport, who was very helpful in the beginning, getting people like myself interested in the subject and working on it.

Then I met RoseAnne Bilodeau of the New Britain Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program and other advocates, people from the University of Connecticut Health Center's Family Planning Program, like Jane Palley. There was a census tract down in New Haven and this tract had the worst record in the country in low birth weight and infant mortality. Child advocates got Yale/New Haven Hospital involved, and the City of New Haven and some advocates came together and started an outreach program to get young mothers and mothers-to-be into health care. They were very successful; they went right into the homes.

What they also found out by opening health care access to these young mothers was that they prevented second pregnancies. But I think health care access, education, outreach, childcare...all seem to fill the bill with me. The program down in New Britain, that was a revelation, too. That was a more intensive program than we were seeing around the state. It was expensive, but they raised a lot of their own money and they did a lot of good things and certainly their record is outstanding.

Norris: What were the major obstacles that teen pregnancy prevention programs faced in those early days? You said they were swimming upstream. As an early advocate, you were probably swimming upstream as well.

Rep. Thompson: I think that's true of a lot of issues that affect children. I think there's a sort of benign neglect and indifference. People don't realize the seriousness of the issue. And it's not that they don't support efforts to help teen pregnancy prevention, since the outcomes are rather drastic. I think there was indifference and I can't explain it very well.

I think we're going through a critical stage in our state's development right now. We've had welfare reform, a lot more people going to work who might have received welfare for a couple of years. At the same time, we have the highest per capita income in the world. We're the richest state in the richest country in the world. We have some of the best-educated people in technology. We have people who are trained and educated to cope with technology as it evolves. As the same time, the incidence of poverty among children is increasing.

In a ten-year period we've gone from fifth to twenty-sixth in the country in terms of children in poverty. I don't think people believe me, but the increase in the incidence of poverty in our state is the highest of any state in the nation. We've gone from about 5-6% of our children living in poverty to about 18%. When you say things like that to people, and they look around, they see everyone doing well, the unemployment rate is the lowest it's ever been, I think it's less than 2% around Stamford. It doesn't seem to impress people, those numbers.

You can't end poverty in Africa until you end poverty in Connecticut. If we don't have the answers here, we're not going to find them anywhere else. So I think it's something like that with teen pregnancy prevention. There was a sort of indifference. And people came along and said we have to educate kids, we have to teach them how to prevent pregnancy. That got into the issue of sex education and there was a lot of resistance to that. Even today, you're treading on shaky ground with that issue. On the one hand, the people opposed to that — and they're decent people, they want to do right by their children — can't transfer that to other people who might not have their same values.

I heard an amazing statistic at the teen pregnancy prevention conference here in Hartford at the Institute for Living. The woman who led off the discussion said that 75% of the teenagers who became pregnant in Hartford in the previous annual period had left high school and got pregnant *after* they left high school. And the guy who was the national expert, a pediatrician, said that was high, it was at 50% in the nation.

The message I got from that was that it's a good thing to stay in school if you want to prevent teen pregnancy. I was still astonished that you have to be sixteen to leave school, and you're still a teenager for three more years and these girls were getting pregnant somewhere in that period. And the other interesting statistic was the one about older fellows, twenty-one years of age, dating girls sixteen. Those two statistics really floored me. And I was thinking about all the things they were doing down in New Britain — keeping kids in school, keeping them active, getting them active in the community — really worked. This high dropout rate in the schools had very bad outcomes for kids, and for girls it has an even worse outcome if those numbers continue.

So I think it was the indifference. People just couldn't relate to the incidence of teen pregnancy. The sex education business, which was a difficult sell at the time, has improved quite a bit.

And then there's welfare reform. I'm not convinced that it's all it's cracked up to be, because I think it does keep people in poverty, many people. But there was this image out there, that more and more people were going back to work and good things would happen. But for teenagers dropping out of school and the exposure they have in society to many unsavory values, that was all part of it, I think.

I'm still convinced that if you walked into a legislator's office and asked him or her how much we're spending on teen pregnancy, they would be hard put to pin down a number. But they would all tell you whatever we can do to prevent teen pregnancy, I'm for. I think that's true.

One of the other things was, early on, we had difficulty measuring the effectiveness of the money we were spending. But I still go back to that indifference...people just couldn't believe



that these things were happening. When I was growing up, there was one girl who got pregnant...I still can remember her name. She disappeared for a while and then came back and went to school. But that was it.

Norris: Do you think that government, in general, is looking more to the prevention side rather than trying to fix problems?

Rep. Thompson: That whole idea of access to health care, that's predicated on the idea of prevention. We have programs now for healthy families, where young parents go right into the hospital and the health care people meet the mother and father of the newborn, although this, of course, is after the fact. After this coming year, we'll have sixteen sites providing that service. They'll receive assessments about the health of their child. It's been very successful in preventing abuse and neglect of children and also second pregnancies. And the mother can go back to school and go on with her life.

We are investing more money in prevention, although not enough. And I'm sure that my colleagues are tired of hearing that from me. Anything that you can do to support a family is important. A lot of these teenagers who get pregnant, you know, they don't get what they need at home, or in the community, so they seek out the companionship of others and the next thing you know they have a problem. A big problem.

Norris: What do you think brought other legislators around to supporting teen pregnancy prevention? Are there new obstacles that you're facing now as opposed to the obstacles we've already discussed?

Rep. Thompson: I think a lot of it was legislators becoming aware of teen pregnancy prevention programs in their communities. This past session, I had one legislator come to me and say we're beginning something in our community to deal with teen pregnancy. They had begun a program a few years back and had been supported by a local foundation and local government, but they needed \$35,000.

The University of Connecticut Health Center's Family Planning Program said they were looking at two communities that were experiencing higher rates of teen pregnancy. A legislator from one of those towns came to me and said his community was trying to put something together, but that they needed help. Well, when you have the University talking to you and the community talking to you...so we're expanding the sites this year. I think as people become aware of the problem locally...you know Roseanne Bilodeau and the program in New Britain have been very successful in educating that community about the problem and getting other community resources involved. So I think, as legislators become aware of local efforts, support for teen pregnancy prevention increases.

We've got some programs now where teenage mothers are going back to school because childcare is being provided. And that wakes up a community to the problem. But the biggest obstacle is still the indifference and that's just beyond me, I just can't understand it.

This year, when the smoke clears, we'll be spending \$700 million in subsidies to businesses. There's the hope that this will spur the economy. Well, the economy's pumping pretty well right now. We've reduced corporate taxes, we've reduced business taxes, we've given business incentives, and so on — it's costing us several hundred million dollars, and yet we're stingy when it comes to these prevention programs. There's this aura about investing in business, saying it will trickle down to the rest of society. Well, there's some truth to that I'm sure, but

there's still the fact that if we don't get dental services to children when they're small, they're going to pay for that for the rest of their lives. Yet it's such a small investment and it's the same with teen pregnancy prevention. We are getting better and better about providing information that prevention works.

We've invested a lot of money into Constitution Plaza, and it really hasn't worked. Even with the economy improving now, businesses have come and gone, and it really hasn't been that successful. To turn around and say that we should invest \$500 to \$600 million dollars there and subsidize high rent apartments, \$60-70,000 per unit, and it will trickle down, that you need that higher income people spending money in downtown... Well, you can have that, but give me a couple of million dollars to provide dental care for children and families, give me a couple of million dollars to expand CONNPACE, so seniors don't have to choose between their prescriptions and eating breakfast. You can do those things, but don't ignore these things.

I remember when Governor Weicker came in and said we're scheduled to spend \$220 million on unemployed individuals for General Assistance and we really can't afford to do that anymore. Michigan had just done the same thing, leaving it to charities and churches to pick up the slack. So we put in timelines and other services and the first year our budget went down \$60 million. It's down to less than a \$100 million now. And the economy has improved and there are more jobs now. But, where did those savings go? Well, we put it into other programs and providing other services, so, in a way, we've been expanding these services. But not to the extent that we've been supporting business. Some of that can be justified, but you can't justify it by taking away money from people in poverty. The number of elderly in poverty went from 20% to 5%, but the number of children in poverty went from 5% to 18%. That doesn't mean that the 15% of the elderly have it easy now; many of them missed out on programs like CONNPACE because they were just over the eligibility level. But you keep trying to convince people that prevention is a good investment.

You look at the people in prison, and many of them have special education needs and came out of poverty. We run these stories about young women who have babies and then come out of poverty, and then somehow make it. But they are such exceptions — they're outstanding people. But for the vast majority, to have a baby as a teenager means your potential is severely, severely limited and it's very difficult. The potential may be there, but it has to be nurtured.

Norris: What changes have you seen in teen pregnancy prevention programs over the years?

Rep. Thompson: Maybe it was always going on, but I'm learning about these different things. We had a hearing out in Putnam one time, and I talked to a couple of mothers who were participating in teen pregnancy prevention programs that their kids were in — and they were boys. And one mother said I want my son to have some activities and he wanted to play soccer. So he needed an entrance fee, and cleats and this and that, and I can't afford it. So we help with this program and they do a lot of different things and he's busy and active. That was kind of a revelation — that boys are part of it. Then there are mentoring programs that bring in adults with genuine interest in young people. What's most refreshing is that sex education is more accepted and more kids are learning how to protect themselves and about abstaining. All these programs seem to be working and it's a combination of community involvement and education.

Norris: Teen births do happen disproportionately to children in low-income groups. What effects do you see coming out of welfare reform that could impact teen pregnancy?

Rep. Thompson: The economy makes a big difference in terms of when welfare reform was ushered in. Peter Edelman wrote an article in [The Atlantic Monthly](#); he had resigned from the Clinton Administration in protest over welfare reform. He had statistics about how welfare goes down when the economy picks up and increases when the economy does poorly. So he said we

could have done nothing and we would be seeing the same results. The good thing about welfare reform is, besides time limits, it got people thinking about how they could help by creating jobs. Many municipalities and businesses tried to create employment, although usually low-paying jobs.

Kids growing up in welfare homes knew they were poor. And they saw their parent or parents having to take advantage of soup kitchens, food stamps, Medicaid and other programs to survive. Some of the former welfare recipients will make it, but some won't. Fortunately, we have a safety net here in Connecticut.

Welfare reform is a mixed blessing. For adults to try to leave welfare and fail, well, they're adults. But for kids to see it happen... We need to do more in childcare and helping those people who want to advance themselves through education.

You know, I went through college because of the G.I. Bill, and then graduate school, and I was married, and it was all part-time. But if you're a single parent, and say you have a kid who has problems...it's tough. And that's the downside of welfare reform, because some people's lives are harder.

My answer is if we make health care available for those people and their kids, and childcare programs, then those kids will have a fighting chance, like in France, like in Canada. People complain about the health system in Canada, but they have universal education, universal childcare. Kids get decent childcare from day one if they need it. Italy is another country that has very good childcare programs and there's no reason why we can't learn from that and emulate that.

We have excellent childcare programs in this country but you have to be able to afford them. We have a Head Start program and it's great, although it starts three years too late, but it's a great program and it helps kids. There are some great programs out there and a lot of potential.

Some portion of our population is always going to have barriers and need help. But there's no reason why their children have to inherit that kind of existence if we have the proper supports in place.

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