In 2008, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Colombia together with the United Nations Population Fund launched the “Youth-Friendly Health Services Model.” Designed to meet the specific sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents and young people in Colombia, the model sets general guidelines for the provision of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in health centers.

However, despite a law mandating its implementation, more than half of the country’s municipalities failed to do so. In response, Profamilia Colombia, an Ampliando el Acceso* local partner, initiated efforts in February 2016 to strengthen advocacy around implementation of the model in the municipality of Rionegro, where the need for youth-friendly health services (YFHS) is particularly acute. After months of stalled progress, their advocacy yielded quick and lasting results.

Over several weeks in February, Profamilia developed and submitted recommendations to the newly-elected mayor of Rionegro, including a recommendation for the adoption of strategies to prevent teen pregnancy. The secretary of health formally adopted those recommendations, and on May 13, the mayor issued an administrative act framing the prevention of adolescent pregnancy as a municipal priority. The act also established an inter-sectoral commission charged with overseeing the implementation of YFHS throughout Rionegro, and in December, the municipality allocated to the secretary of health an operating budget for the program of USD $40,000.

As a result of these advocacy efforts, adolescents and young people in Rionegro can now access SRH services and information in private, confidential settings free of judgment from providers and without parental involvement. Moreover, by providing training to youth cadres on sexual and reproductive rights and advocacy, Profamilia has empowered youth to monitor implementation of the model and its expected impact on adolescent pregnancy. This ensures the sustainability of youth-friendly services in the municipality and helps the government to deliver on its promise of reducing teen pregnancy by 2020.

**Why Are Youth-Friendly Services Critical in Rionegro?**

Over the past decade, Colombia has experienced an economic turnaround brought about, in part, by an improved security situation. Yet across the country, deep

---

*Ampliando el Acceso, or “Expanding Access” is a one-year, independently funded project launched by Advance Family Planning and the International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region. The project seeks to expand access to contraception information and services for youth in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico by strengthening advocacy efforts.
social inequalities persist, particularly among young people. As a result, rates of adolescent pregnancy in Colombia remain among the highest in Latin America and the world (17.4%).

Teenage pregnancy in Colombia is directly related to factors such as poverty, unequal power relations, lack of opportunities, and low levels of schooling, among other decisive social and political factors. Indeed, among the key risk factors for adolescent pregnancy in Colombia is a lack of education. More than 40% of women between the ages of 13 and 24 in Colombia are not currently attending an educational institution, and of those who are or have been pregnant, 41.8% have attained only a primary-level education.¹

Another important risk factor is the low uptake of contraceptive methods. The use of contraceptives is significantly lower among Colombia’s youth than other age groups. According to figures from 2015, 69.9% of adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 do not use contraceptives. Similarly, the country has a high rate of unmet need regarding contraception. This unmet need increases among women with lower educational levels and in lower wealth quintiles, and women between the ages of 15 to 19 represent the greatest percentage of unmet need for contraception (19.3%).²

In Rionegro, 37% of the population is between ages 10 and 29, and some 40% reside in rural areas. Close to 15,000 residents of Rionegro have been displaced from conflict zones, making them especially vulnerable; internally displaced persons in Colombia are at increased risk of violations of their sexual and reproductive rights, and an estimated 30% of displaced girls between ages 13–19 have been pregnant at least once.³ In fact, 16% of all births registered in Rionegro in 2015 were to mothers ages 10–19.⁴

Young People’s Perspectives Prove Pivotal

As the statistics indicate, youth-friendly health services were non-existent in Rionegro prior to 2016. However, the election that year of a new local government brought into office a young mayor who seemed like he might be sensitive to this issue and understand the urgency to act – Profamilia seized the opportunity.

Employing the Advance Family Planning (AFP) SMART methodology, Profamilia outlined an advocacy strategy that began with a mapping of the political landscape to identify key decision-makers. They identified Mayor Andrés Julián Rendón as a potential ally. Throughout his campaign, the 38-year-old father of adolescent children had proposed, as part of his governing plan, to implement policies that benefit youth. He had also expressed an interest in reducing adolescent pregnancy and in sustainable development.

The mapping also indicated that Secretary of Health Diana Mejia would be the most influential champion of a new strategic plan, particularly as it was aligned with the national development plan: “All for a New Country” (2014–2018); the plan cites prevention of adolescent pregnancy as a national priority. Profamilia decided that
the best way to reach out to Secretary of Health Mejia was via WhatsApp, the widely popular messaging app. And it worked. After meeting with Profamilia Mejia called for the formation of a technical commission to adapt the national YFHS model to the reality on the ground in Rionegro. Mejia also stipulated that the commission must be inter-sectorial, comprising all relevant stakeholders, including the secretariats of health, education, sports, culture, and family.

Building on that advocacy win, Profamilia secured, through Mejia, an audience with Mayor Rendón. The meeting with the mayor, held in March, cemented plans to form the technical commission and that the commission would recommend to him a set of inter-sectorial actions for inclusion in the new municipal strategic plan.

The involvement of youth cadre, known as “youth multipliers,” was pivotal to Profamilia’s advocacy success. Between March and July of 2016, twenty-three young people were trained in sexual and reproductive rights and AFP’s SMART methodology to advocate for their rights and to monitor the implementation of youth-friendly health services in Rionegro. (A year later, these 23 young people held a social monitoring exercise on YFHS in two hospitals of Rionegro and shared the results and their suggestions to improve adolescent health programs with the secretary of health.

Lessons Learned

- **Youth participation yields dividends.** Officials in the secretariat of education at first declined to support the initiative, saying they didn’t see the importance of YFHS. But after witnessing the impact of youth multipliers on their peers at school, teachers and administrators in some institutions began supporting young people to disseminate information on sexual and reproductive rights and became important allies to Profamilia.

- **The formation of the inter-sectorial commission was one of the most important advocacy outcomes.** The first-ever inter-sectorial group established to address the reproductive needs of the municipality’s youth, the commission stands as a foundation for continued advocacy. Preventing adolescent pregnancy cannot be achieved by any one government sector alone, but requires buy-in across the board.

- **Political will is one thing, execution another.** Despite having successfully advocated for the inclusion of YFHS in the municipal strategic plan, implementation of services hinges heavily on human resource capacity and talent. Training the health professionals who serve adolescents is every bit as important as winning over the decision-makers in government.

Next Steps

The process of implementing youth-friendly services continues in Rionegro. The municipal development plan has set a goal of implementing youth-friendly services in seven of the municipalities’ general health centers by the end of 2017, and the city council has hired a permanent YFHS coordinator to oversee that work. Still, stakeholders must remain vigilant: Going forward, peer educators trained by Profamilia will continue conducting social audits in clinics and hospitals to monitor service quality.

References

1. 2015 Colombia Demographic and Health Survey
2. 2015 Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud (ENDS)
3. 2015 Estadísticas Vitales Nacimientos y Defunciones (DANE)
Acknowledgments

This Ampliando el Acceso project received financial support from an anonymous funder, and technical support from the Advance Family Planning initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Institute for Population and Reproductive Health of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Latin America and Caribbean Office of the International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region, of which Profamilia is a part. Likewise, the project had the technical expertise of Profamilia staff, and the young people and local authorities of Rionegro who showed interest, enthusiasm and willingness to generate improvements in SRH among adolescents and young people in the municipality.