

## California Teen Pregnancy Rate Steepest decline in United States

By Amy Denhart

During election years, we hear candidates complain a lot about wasteful government programs. But a recent study by the nonprofit Guttmacher Institute provides startling news about one California program that has solved 52% of a social problem in just 13 years, and saved the state billions of dollars in the process.

It wasn't test scores. Nor was it air pollution or traffic congestion. Rather, California was credited with having the steepest rate of decline in teen pregnancy in the United States. Between 1992 and 2005 our state reduced teen pregnancy by 52%, far above the national average of 37%.

The Guttmacher study credits two California policies for playing a critical role in this success.

The first is comprehensive sexuality education that includes both abstinence and birth control. The second is the state's Family Planning, Access, Care and Treatment Program (FPACT), which provides contraception for low-income residents of California, including teens.

In 1992, California had the dubious distinction of having the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the United States. This was the same year that the state began experimenting with the largest "abstinence-only" program, Education Now and Babies Later (ENABL).

Governor Pete Wilson abruptly ended the ENABL program because it was a failure and a more comprehensive strategy was needed.

When federal grants for abstinence-only programs were introduced in 1997, California was wisely the only state to refuse the funds. Twenty-one states eventually followed California's lead. Why? Because nearly all experts agree that abstinence-only programs ultimately have the opposite effect they intend. Instead of discouraging teens from having sex, abstinence-only programs merely discourage teens from using condoms, thereby increasing

their chances of getting pregnant.

The same year the state rejected abstinence-only dollars, Governor Wilson introduced the highly successful FPACT program. Teens, as well as adults, can enroll in this program based on their individual income and access confidential contraceptive services.

The Guttmacher study notes that the FPACT program is the largest state family planning program in the United States and it credits much of our success in reducing teen pregnancy to California's widespread access to contraceptives.

Before comprehensive sexuality education was required in schools, and before the FPACT program was enacted, California led the nation in teen pregnancy. With these two changes in public policy, we've reversed this alarming trend, and reduced our teen pregnancy rate by a dramatic 52% in just 13 years.

With success like that, you would think the current Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, would be an enthusiastic supporter of FPACT. But he has instead proposed serious cuts to the program. Such cuts would not only increase teen pregnancies, unintended pregnancies in general and the number of abortions, but it would cost the state far more money than it would save.

A recent University of California study concluded that for every dollar the state invests in family planning, it saves more than \$9.25 in health care and social service costs.

Comprehensive sexuality education in schools and affordable, accessible birth control are clearly proven effective at reducing the rate of teen pregnancy.

At Planned Parenthood, we are proud of the success of FPACT and comprehensive sex ed. We hope Governor Schwarzenegger pays close attention to the recent study and recommits himself to the success of these two programs.

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