

Austin American Statesman

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Sunday, April 22, 2007

In the aftermath of last week's U.S. Supreme Court abortion ruling, bills that would help avoid the need for abortions in the first place make more sense than ever. Two such bills, by Rep. Mark Strama, D-Austin, and Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, would greatly expand the promotion of contraceptive services available to women eligible under the Medicaid program.

If more women prevented unwanted pregnancies, there would be two good outcomes: fewer abortions and fewer births, with substantial savings to taxpayers.

The Legislature recognized the potential for savings in 2005 when it created the Women's Health Program, for low-income women ages 18 to 44 who are U.S. citizens. It provides them with several health services, including Pap smears and cancer screenings, as well as contraception help.

The savings are expected to be substantial — about \$278 million for Texas taxpayers over the five-year life of the program and \$189 million for the federal government. That's because while it costs about \$170 a year to provide a woman with basic health care and contraceptives, it costs taxpayers \$8,500 just for the first year of a pregnancy and birth.

The number of Medicaid-paid births probably would astonish most Texans. In 2005, the state reports, Medicaid paid for 213,879 births — 56 percent of *all* Texas births.

The Health and Human Services Commission says the Women's Health Program is off to a good start, having signed up 14,000 women in its first three months of operation.

But Strama and Watson say there's a problem: The state is slated to spend just \$25,000 a year to publicize the program, plus a \$25,000 federal match. Unless more women hear about it, they won't know they can use it.

Strama and Watson's bills (House Bill 1842 and Senate Bill 837), styled the Texas Prevention First Act, would direct the commission to conduct a comprehensive marketing effort to promote the Women's Health Program. It would cost about \$575,000 the first year and about \$1.1 million a year afterward. But taxpayers could reap millions more in savings if more women take advantage of the health services, including contraceptives.

The bills would do two other things, both regarding sex education. One would require Texas schools that teach sex education courses to give parents more detailed information about what is taught — or not — in the classroom. If the course emphasizes abstinence only, for example, then parents who want their children to learn about contraceptives will know that the sex education class won't cover the subject. (Of course, parents would remain free to keep their children out of sex education classes.)

In addition, the bills would require sex education courses to explain the difference between measures of effectiveness of contraceptives when used correctly and when not.

Those with religious objections to contraceptives won't like this kind of legislation even if it reduces the number of abortions.

Yet increased use of contraceptives will not only reduce abortions, but save taxpayers a lot of money. We call on lawmakers to support the legislation.