

## Texas tops U.S. in teen birth rates

By: Christopher Crawford

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*Anthropology senior Cindy Hayes acts as the emergency contraception mascot at the "Prevention First!" kickoff rally on Wednesday afternoon.*

Statistics identifying Texas with some of the highest numbers of teen pregnancies and birth rates in the nation drew lawmakers and lobbyists to the Austin Convention Center Wednesday to promote newly filed legislation aimed at reversing those numbers.

Rep. Mark Strama, D-Austin and former Austin mayor, Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, were key speakers at the conference sponsored by Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region.

According to a September 2006 report "U.S. Teenage Pregnancy Statistics" by the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit sexual health research and education organization, among females age 15 to 19, Texas currently ranks second in the nation for birth rates, fifth in the nation for pregnancy rates and 26th in the nation for abortion rates.

Strama said Texas' high levels of teenage birth rates indicate "we're clearly not getting the job done about helping young women in particular prevent unwanted pregnancies." Strama also said he rejects the premise that sexual education encourages sexual activity.

House Bill 1842, co-authored by Strama, and the identical Senate Bill 837, authored by Watson, otherwise known as the "Texas Prevention First Act," was filed Feb. 22. The House bill was referred to the House Committee on State Affairs on Feb. 27.

According to Planned Parenthood and sponsors of the legislation, the bill aims to increase outreach for Texas' family planning programs, involve parents in their children's sexual education and reduce the risk of unintended pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Strama added the bill will also save tax dollars through preventative family planning. The first year of a Medicaid pregnancy costs taxpayers \$8,500, whereas the Texas Department of State Health Services estimates that preventative family planning costs \$170 per client for one year. Strama also said taxpayers fund one out of every two deliveries in Texas.

"People may never agree about the issue of 'choice', but they all ought to be able to agree about preventing unintended pregnancies from occurring," Strama said.

However, Joe Pojman, executive director of Texas Alliance for Life, said Planned Parenthood's education is strongly skewed towards abortion as a method of birth control. Pojman also said the most effective Texas legislation intended to reduce abortions, pregnancies and births is the 1999 Parental Notification Act requiring physicians to notify parents before performing abortions on minors.

Pojman said nothing Planned Parenthood does can as effectively lower the numbers of teen pregnancy, birth rates and abortions as the Parental Notification Act.

The events were co-hosted by the Texas Association of Planned Parenthood Affiliates and the Women's Health and Family Planning Associations of Texas. Hundreds of Texans attended the conference Wednesday and some also participated in a rally in front of the Capitol.

Ken Lambrecht, chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood of Texas, said the main goal of prevention should come first and that all women should have access to birth control.

"When one out of every two pregnancies in the United States is unplanned, access to birth control and comprehensive sexual education is important to prevent those unintended pregnancies," Lambrecht said.

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