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Honest broker / Needed: objective, medically accurate federal policies on family planning.

Staff

ERIC Keroack's exit from the federal stage was nearly as dramatic as his entrance - and much better news. Last week, five months after his appointment, the patently unqualified deputy assistant secretary for population affairs resigned his post in the Department of Health and Human Services. In a letter, Keroack told his staff he needed to focus on a Medicaid probe of his former medical practice.

This wouldn't be the first time Keroack's methods were questioned. When President Bush appointed Keroack last year, many mainstream scientists and public health specialists were appalled. Keroack's new job entailed managing a \$283 million annual budget dedicated to providing pregnancy tests, contraceptives, breast cancer screenings and other health services to 5 million low-income Americans. Yet Keroack's past was pocked with affiliations and statements openly antagonistic to these public health goals.

For years, the Massachusetts ob-gyn worked for a "crisis pregnancy center" that untruthfully warned clients abortion increased chances of cancer. Distributing birth control, the group stated, was "demeaning" to women.

Keroack's own command of science was fragile, at best: He incensed several scientists by twisting their research into an outlandish theory that multiple sexual partners lowered hormone levels key to emotional bonding.

Americans are well rid of this sub-par public health official. The president can redeem himself with an appointee who appreciates science and the value of family planning.

Meanwhile, in Texas, legislators have a related opportunity. Up for review is a no-nonsense bill that's based on widespread consensus regarding prevention of unwanted pregnancy.

The Texas Prevention First Act would publicize an excellent existing family planning program for lower-income women. Its payoff to Texas is so great - a projected \$278 million in savings over five years in Medicaid, prenatal and delivery costs - that it's crucial to use this program fully.

Prevention First also would let parents, regardless of their views about sex education, know exactly what their children's schools teach in this field. The law requires school districts to disclose the contents of their sex ed classes. But the guidelines are murky and the curricula wildly variable: anything from abstinence-only classes to comprehensive sex education.

Prevention First requires schools to spell out, in writing, exactly what a child is being taught and how a parent can supplement that teaching. As always, parents can remove their children from sex-ed class.

But most Texans, several polls show, support sex ed that includes abstinence and contraceptive information. They also want to use access to family planning to minimize unwanted pregnancies.

Consensus is powerful. Lawmakers can reflect it by passing Prevention First, which bolsters measures that have earned most Texans' approval.

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