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Planned Parenthood acts regionally

The timing couldn't be better

By Michael Douglas, Beacon Journal editorial page editor

Look at that, Norton! For all the talk about the needed consolidation of services in the public sector, the layers of government choking Ohio, the nonprofit world took the lead last week.

Five Planned Parenthood organizations announced their merger into Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio, covering 21 counties from Columbiana to Sandusky, from Ashtabula to Morrow. The headquarters are located on West Exchange Street in Akron, the city proving the heart of it all. Factor the likes of Cleveland, Youngstown, Canton and Lorain, and you have 40 percent of the state's population within the boundaries.

Why take such a step? Listen carefully mayors, township trustees and other local officials.

Tara Broderick, the organization's chief executive officer, cited ``reducing duplication of efforts" and ``strengthening core services." Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio wants to be more responsive to its 57,000 clients. It wants to deploy its resources more effectively and efficiently.

All of it suggests a theme Planned Parenthood organizations pressed (successfully) at the Statehouse during the recent budget debate. The Republican majorities in the legislature wanted to route money to programs that focus on getting teenagers to abstain from sex. Nothing wrong with the concept. The trouble is, that approach alone hasn't yielded the desired results.

Planned Parenthood highlighted the data. A recent study of the federally funded abstinence-only programs found the programs have little, if any, effect on the sexual behavior of young people. The Guttmacher Institute reported that teen pregnancies have declined in recent years largely because of improved contraceptive use and more effective birth-control methods.

Thus, the logic goes: Pursue a comprehensive approach to sex education, emphasizing abstinence and good judgment -- along with complete information about contraception and avoiding sexually transmitted diseases.

More, Guttmacher reported the cultural fact of life: Nine in 10 Americans have sex before marriage, and that has been the case for generations.

Ted Strickland took the information into account in reviewing the budget. The governor used his line-item veto to erase the language involving abstinence-only programs. He chose the course that promises to address the problem. (The Republican majorities did not attempt to override his action.)

When Planned Parenthood executives and advocates talk about consolidating to improve their operation, they linger on their own fact: 97 percent of their services do not involve abortion. The organization is a health-care safety net for many women, providing, among other services, pap tests, breast exams, HIV testing and education, diabetes and cholesterol screening.

Cecile Richards, the national president of Planned Parenthood, echoed the message during her visit to Akron and Cleveland last week marking the merger. She explained that the average American woman wants to have two children, spends five years doing so and roughly three decades seeking to avoid pregnancy. Her point is that Planned Parenthood plays a critical part in helping many women manage their lives, often serving as a tool to fight poverty.

Worth noting is that the federal government agrees, at least in principle. The federal budget includes a line for comprehensive family planning (minus abortion). Unfortunately, the funding hasn't kept pace with inflation. If it had since 1980, family planning would receive almost \$700 million a year. The reality? Almost \$300 million, an insufficient sum to meet the need.

In Ohio, the trend has been similarly frustrating, Planned Parenthood affiliates recently losing \$1.7 million in state

money. The struggle (even with the victory involving abstinence-only programs) corresponds with a helpful confluence of events. Cecile Richards brings sharp political skills to her position. She is a former labor organizer, get-out-the-vote campaigner and aide to Nancy Pelosi. The consolidation of Planned Parenthood in Northeast Ohio promises to free additional resources for lobbying and policy-making.

In other words, more effective includes improved advocacy.

No one at Planned Parenthood needs to be reminded of the Supreme Court ruling in the spring, the majority striking down a specific medical procedure, intruding on the relationship between a woman and her doctor. Perhaps most dismaying, the majority framed its decision as particularly serving the interest of the woman.

The ruling did nothing if not throw the issue of abortion into flux. Of late, New Hampshire lawmakers have repealed a law requiring teen girls to notify their parents before having an abortion. Missouri has placed new restrictions on Planned Parenthood and other clinics. Ohio has its own set of challenges, ranking 48th in access to contraception and reproductive health care. The 2008 election nears.

Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio has it right. There's no better time to reorganize and expand the organization's influence.

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