

Proponent Testimony on House Bill 293
House Committee on Health
Cheryl Pentella on behalf of the National Council of Jewish Women
Wednesday, November 18, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Boyd and Members of the Health Committee.

My name is Cheryl Pentella and I am co-president of the National Council of Jewish Women, Columbus Section. As an organization of 90,000 members across the country and 600 here in Columbus dedicated to the well-being of women, children and families, we urge members of the health committee to pass the Prevention First legislation to prevent unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases and to reduce the need for abortion.

NCJW believes that access to contraceptives, including emergency contraceptives for all women and comprehensive safe sex education are not only essential components of a healthy community, but also fundamental to our right to religious freedom. We firmly believe in a woman's right to make personal decisions based on her own beliefs, a right that is protected by our Constitution. When one religious view is imposed upon us all we are denied our religious liberty and the protections of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Sadly, that is the case in Ohio today.

The vast majority of Americans support comprehensive sexuality education, one that provides abstinence and contraceptive information. In a 2006 study, 86 percent of those surveyed supported comprehensive sex education. That is not surprising when you consider that virtually all American women – 98 percent according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute – have used contraception at some point in their life.

In order to make responsible, health decisions, young people need – and society has a moral obligation to provide – medically accurate, age-appropriate information about sex. Comprehensive sexuality education teaches that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but also provides accurate information about contraceptive options so that individuals can make informed life decisions.

As a parent of a 21 year old and 25 year old, I agree that parents should discuss these issues with their children, but it is obvious that when you look at statistics related to teen pregnancy and STDs, many parents don't. While I have always told my children that the best choice they can make is abstinence, I know better and the statistics prove that youth don't always make the right choice. In fact, research demonstrates that their brains aren't even fully developed until 25 which accounts for the higher incidence of risk taking behavior such as drunk driving.

The cost to society when a young woman drops out of school to have a child and is unable to complete their education is substantial. Well-educated youth lead to a trained, competent workforce that will make our community stronger. Youth who fail to graduate have a higher incidence of substance abuse and juvenile delinquency and they are more likely to be unemployed or to earn an income that is below the federal poverty line. Ohio cannot afford to continue a failed public policy that negatively impacts our overall economic health and well-being.

Recent research demonstrates that young people who receive comprehensive sexuality education were significantly more likely to use condoms if sexually active and were significantly less likely to be involved in a pregnancy. According to a report commissioned by Congress and released in 2007, abstinence only programs do not have statistically significant impacts on the rate of sexual abstinence, the number of sex partners, or the age at which youth become sexually active.

Without clear cut evidence that abstinence is a successful public policy, it is obvious to us that the Ohio legislature is allowing a religious minority to impose its religious beliefs about sexuality education upon all Ohioans.

NCJW is also committed to protecting the right of women to fill a prescription for birth control or to obtain emergency contraception over the counter in a pharmacy. All women, regardless of age, income, religion, race, or geographic location must have access to the full range of contraceptive options, including emergency contraception.

No woman should be denied access to legal prescribed drugs by pharmacists who choose to impose their personal religious beliefs on others. Denying or delaying dispensation of medication prescribed by a health care provider is discrimination. In addition, NCJW believes that refusal clauses that allow workers to deny services to others must include safeguards so that any one worker's religious beliefs do not infringe on the rights of others. While we believe that diverse religious practices must be accommodated in the workplace, there must be safeguards in place to protect the rights of all.

Support for Prevention First is a positive step forward, as we move further away from policy dominated by one religious belief and hopefully to a new reality, which protects our religious freedom.

If you fail to support legislation that protects our religious freedom, we can only conclude that the Ohio legislature is allowing a religious minority to impose its religious beliefs upon all Ohioans. And, we intend to make sure our members know who those legislators are who have denied not just women, but families their basic constitutional rights.

Thank you.

