



Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health

Policy Priorities 2010

The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health is pleased to release its 2010 Policy Priorities. This document outlines our goals for the coming year as we work in partnership with youth and adult allies across Illinois to:

- Increase access to and equity of adolescent sexual health care services.
- Increase access to and equity of sexuality education in schools and communities.
- Ensure support for pregnant and parenting youth to complete their educational goals.

Increase Access to Sexual Health Care

Accessible, affordable, quality sexual health care services are critical to the health and well-being of youth. The majority of Americans become sexually active during their adolescence and early adulthood. Yet adolescents in Illinois are systematically denied access to appropriate, effective sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV prevention, sexuality education, and related health care. Failure to access sexual health services can have serious public health consequences.

- Nearly 25 percent of young women and girls have at least one of four commonly reported STIs – Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, and the human papillomavirus. One in two African-American adolescent females is infected.¹
- Of the approximately 750,000 adolescent pregnancies nationwide each year, around 82 percent are unintended. More than one-quarter end in abortion.²
- In Illinois, 49 percent of female high school students and 52 percent of males reported having had intercourse.³

Youth must be able to obtain a full range of sexual health services to make healthy, responsible decision-making throughout their lifetimes. All young people—immigrant, low-income, LGBTQI youth, and pregnant and parenting youth—deserve access to affordable, quality sexual health care.

- **ICAH supports condom availability** in schools and communities. Correct, consistent condom use remains the most effective way to prevent the spread of HIV and other STIs among sexually active individuals, and availability does not increase sexual activity.
- **ICAH supports the rights of young people to consent confidentially** to reproductive health care, including abortion, without the involvement of a parent or legal guardian.
- **ICAH supports non-prescriptive access to emergency contraception**, a safe and effective method to prevent pregnancy that is currently only available to women 18 and older without a prescription.
- **ICAH supports the voluntary use and availability of HPV vaccines** to reduce HPV and cervical cancer rates and the right of youth to consent to vaccination. ICAH does not support mandated vaccinations.
- **ICAH supports youth-friendly health care services** that offer welcoming, non-judgmental, and safe spaces for adolescent clients.

Increase Access to Sexuality Education

The health of our youth depends on their ability to make informed choices. Research shows that medically-accurate, age-appropriate, sexuality education equips youth to make healthy decisions. But, since 1996, Congress has appropriated over \$1.8 billion toward ineffective abstinence-only programs.

- In 2008, the Illinois Department of Human Services and state community-based organizations received over \$10 million in federal funds for abstinence-only programs.⁴

- Sixty-six percent of Illinois classrooms are not providing comprehensive sexuality education. Over 52 percent of sex education teachers in the state do not teach about where to get birth control and health-related services.⁵

Youth have the right to access responsible sexuality education that provides the information, skills, and resources necessary for informed, healthy decision-making. Sexuality education programs that provide a strong abstinence message coupled with clear, honest information about STIs, contraception, social pressures, and how and when to obtain health care have been found to be effective at delaying the onset of sexual activity, reducing the number of sexual partners, and increasing the use of contraception among adolescents.⁶

- **ICAH supports state and federal legislation** that promotes medically-accurate, age-appropriate responsible sexuality education in schools and communities.
- **ICAH supports funding for responsible sexuality education** and opposes public investment in abstinence-only programs.
- **ICAH supports grassroots efforts to change local sexuality education policies**, encouraging school boards to pass and implement sound policies.
- **ICAH supports the advocacy work of its Illinois Youth Policy Council**, a group of youth ages 14 to 20 who implement grassroots strategies to gain community and legislative support for responsible sexuality education.

Ensure Support for Pregnant and Parenting Youth

Youth have the right to continue a pregnancy to term and become a parent. Youth who decide to become young parents should be fully supported in that decision. Pregnant and parenting youth face significant challenges in completing their educational goals while caring for their children, navigating their own adolescence and creating a safe and healthy future for themselves. Finishing school is a critical marker for lifelong success.

- In 2008, adolescent women accounted for over 10 percent of all Illinois births.⁷
- More than half of adolescents with a school-age pregnancy drop out between eighth and twelfth grade and only 60% of young mothers complete their high school education or receive a GED.⁸
- Young parents who do complete high school are less likely to attend college compared to their childless peers.⁸

Comprehensive policies and well-funded, accessible programs and services are essential in helping pregnant and parenting youth finish school.

- **ICAH supports enforcement of the federal Title IX gender equity law** that prohibits discrimination on the basis of actual or potential parental, family, or marital status.
- **ICAH supports funding for programs and services** that help pregnant and parenting youth complete their education.
- **ICAH supports the advocacy work of its Young Parent Alliance**, a group of pregnant and parenting youth and allies. YPA works to increase public awareness of the challenges of adolescent pregnancy and parenthood and to advocate for educational and supportive services in schools.

References

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4. Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. 2009. "Illinois State Profile Fiscal Year 2008."
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