

Abortion prevention: The Reducing the Need for Abortion Initiative

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People who have knowledge of and access to contraceptives tend to have fewer unwanted pregnancies and therefore fewer abortions. It's no accident that the world's lowest abortion rates are found in Belgium and the Netherlands, where contraception is widely available, or that the highest rates are in Cuba and Vietnam, where access is limited. If you really want to reduce the number of abortions, a logical place to begin is with the expansion of family planning programs.

That logic has been mostly ignored in the United States. A "Prevention First" bill, which would expand family planning and teen-pregnancy prevention programs, has been stalled for years in Congress. On teen pregnancy, the U.S. has for a decade focused on abstinence-only programs that encourage sexual abstinence and don't refer to contraceptive methods except to indicate their relative failure rates. From the start, health experts have doubted the effectiveness of these programs. This month the nonpartisan National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reported that there is no evidence that abstinence-only programs "delay the initiation of sex, hasten the return to abstinence or reduce the number of sexual partners" among teens. Meanwhile, the report said, programs that educate teens about contraception while encouraging abstinence have been shown to have a positive effect on behavior.

Given this recent history, it is especially good news that Congress has put an extra \$615 million in an appropriations bill to expand family planning and teen-pregnancy prevention programs as well as to improve access to health care for women and children and to fund child care. The measure, dubbed the "Reducing the Need for Abortion Initiative," is modest in financial terms. But if it does make it into law, it will represent a major step toward creating a "third way" on abortion—a way that offers practical help to women in preventing unplanned pregnancies and carrying their babies to term.

In describing the funding package to reporters, Representative Tim Ryan (D., Ohio), one of the sponsors, acknowledged that birth control has become the “fault line” in the search for a third way on abortion. But Ryan, himself a Catholic, said that “we can’t run from the fact that if we do not provide birth control for women we’re going to have an increasing number of abortions.” He added that he doesn’t think contraception is a radical idea. “This is mainstream stuff. Ninety-eight percent of women [in the U.S.] have used birth control.”

Ryan is right: birth control is not controversial for the vast majority of Catholic or Protestant women. Providing education and consistent access to birth control is one of the best strategies for helping families and reducing the number of abortions. It’s about time politicians recognized it.