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REPORT RELEASED ON FOUR TITLE V ABSTINENCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation today released findings from a multi-year evaluation of four Title V, Section 510 abstinence education programs. Begun in 1999, the study was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Background

Title V, Section 510 programs were among the first abstinence programs to be implemented under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Nationwide, more than 700 Title V, Section 510 programs receive up to \$50 million in federal funds annually for programs that teach abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage.

Since the 1996 legislation, the number of abstinence education programs operating nationwide has increased. There are now hundreds of additional programs outside the Title V, Section 510 program which receive support from the federal government or the private sector. There is considerable variation in the range of approaches that are being used by different abstinence programs, the specific populations served and the strategies for engaging youth, parents and community stakeholders. Abstinence education programs outside Title V were not evaluated as part of this study.

This new report evaluates behavioral outcomes as well as knowledge of risks associated with teen sexual activity by participants in four Title V, Section 510 programs. The programs selected for this study offered a range of implementation and program strategies. All four programs served youth in elementary and middle school located in: Powhatan, VA; Miami, FL; Milwaukee, WI; and Clarksdale, MS.

The study followed up with youth four to six years after they received the intervention in an elementary or middle school program. It compared youth who participated in a Title V, Section 510 abstinence education program with peers in a control group that received “services as usual” provided by their school. Youth in the program group were eligible to receive Title V abstinence education program services, while those in the control group received only the usual health, family life, and sex education services available in the school and community.

Summary of Major Findings

Findings indicate that youth who were assigned to the Title V abstinence education “program group” were no more likely than youth who were assigned to the “services as usual” control group to have abstained from sex. Those who reported having sex had similar numbers of sexual partners and had initiated sex at the same mean age. Contrary to concerns raised by critics of abstinence education, program group youth were no more likely to have engaged in unprotected sex than control group youth.

The programs improved identification of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) though had no overall impact on knowledge of unprotected sex risks and the consequences of STDs. Both program and control group youth had a good understanding of the risks of pregnancy but a less clear understanding of STDs and their health consequences.

Implications for Abstinence Education

This study presents findings from a selected group of abstinence education programs that were among the first of the programs funded when the program was authorized in 1996. Since then, many programs have been developed that incorporate building peer support and providing abstinence education to high school students. In addition, HHS recently encouraged states to focus on young people most likely to bear children out-of-wedlock instead of directing their programs to pre-teens only. The field has continued to evolve, and the lessons learned from this study will help shape future programming efforts.

This new study has several implications for planning and strengthening abstinence education programs overall:

- Targeting youth solely at young ages may not be sufficient. These programs were targeted solely at middle school youth, and did not continue to serve youth as they entered high school. This study suggests that delivering abstinence education programs in middle school may not be enough to sustain changes in attitudes and behaviors.
- Peer support for abstinence may be protective in middle school, but erodes sharply during the teen years. Friends’ support for abstinence is a significant predictor of future sexual abstinence. This finding suggests that promoting support for abstinence among peer networks into the high school years should be an important feature of future abstinence programs.

Findings from this study of four Title V, Section 510 programs highlight the need for continued rigorous research on programs for preventing teen pregnancy and risk-taking behavior. HHS is committed to understanding how best to encourage youth to make healthy choices.

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