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**Christie Vilsack calls for pregnancy dialogue**

Dennis Friend, Staff Writer  
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Staff Photo/Dennis Friend - Former Iowa First Lady, Christie Vilsack.

Former First Lady Christie Vilsack is now executive director of the Iowa Initiative, a five-year project aimed at reducing the number of unintended pregnancies.

"We're trying to create a public conversation on this. It's a community issue," she said. Vilsack spoke at Children's Square USA in Council Bluffs Friday morning, and is traveling to towns and cities across the state to deliver the same message.

"We have a responsibility to give all women in our state the knowledge and means to prevent unintended pregnancy," she said.

The Iowa Initiative was started to reduce the high rate of unintended pregnancies among Iowa women ages 18-30 through networking, research and public outreach. She became executive director of the initiative in January.

It is funded by a private foundation, she said, and, if it works, it may serve as a model for a nationwide program.

"Women need more access to information, and we're hoping to build a coalition as well as grassroots support," she said.

Right now, more than 50 percent of all pregnancies in Iowa in the 18-30 age group are unintended.

The initiative hopes to work with other groups to increase access to birth control options and family planning information.

Visack pointed out that Iowa ranks 43rd among the states in providing funding for family planning, and 48th in access before running through a list of needs:

"Tens of thousands of women are without access to birth control services. The Iowa Initiative hopes to open new clinics so that any woman can get access to long-acting reversible contraceptives. They need to know how to use them. They need to know how to plan a pregnancy. It's a health care issue," she said.

The Initiative's plan is to build support for state and federal funding for birth control services by shedding light on the high social and economic costs paid by young mothers and their communities.

"When you talk about teen pregnancies in Iowa, it costs \$47 million a year to take care of the costs. With older women, we don't even know those costs. But an unintended pregnancy affects families, emotions, the economy. Everyone's affected by this issue," she said.

There are reasons for concern.

A group of teenage girls in Massachusetts entered a pact to get pregnant, and 17 succeeded.

Teen pregnancies have begun to rise again after a steady decline from 1991 to 2005. Birth rates for teenagers between 15 and 17 years old went up 3 percent in 2006, the first increase since 1991, according to the National Centre for Health Statistics.

"The federal government put lots of money into an abstinence-only program in schools. It did not work. What do young people know by the time they're 18 and older?" Vilsack asked. "Teenagers tell us they're not getting enough information. We need to look at schools, churches, parents and help them all have a conversation."

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