



## **The Des Moines Register**

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### **"Iowa needs to have a talk about contraception"**

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It's not the sort of thing anyone wants to think of, especially not in relation to one's self. But here it is: More than one in every three people born in Iowa was the result of an unplanned pregnancy. In some counties, it's one in two.

This isn't brought up to get you guessing about who those unintended people might be; it's to point out that Iowa needs to do better on family planning. And with a new program run by the state's former first lady, let's hope it will.

On Thursday, Christie Vilsack launched the Iowa Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancies, which she will direct. It's funded by a \$1.5 million initial grant from the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation. That's the legacy of billionaire Warren Buffett's late wife.

Teen births alone cost Iowa taxpayers about \$82 million a year (2004 figure) in social services and maternal health, according to Vilsack, "far more than prevention efforts would cost."

Those pregnancies that don't result in abortions - 6,700 in 2006 - derail the educational and career prospects of young mothers and often consign children to lives of poverty. In Iowa, 36 percent of all births are unplanned.

Not that the United States as a whole is doing so well, either. Half of all pregnancies in this country are unintended, one of the highest levels in the developed world. Somewhere along the way to becoming the richest, most powerful nation, we stopped paying attention to family planning, and now we're paying for the fallout.



The reasons are a complex mix of political, personal and economic. But in Iowa, lack of access to family-planning services is a big one. We're 48th in the nation in the availability of family-planning services and 39th in public funding for them.

More than half of Iowa's counties have no family-planning centers, leaving 170,000 Iowa women in need of services, according to Vilsack.

At the federal level, the White House has responded on the back end by investing in efforts to get poor people to marry. At the front end, it's relied on unrealistic abstinence-only education programs.

It's not that as a nation we don't understand the importance of contraception. We invest heavily in it internationally even if we limit its reach with conditions. The global gag rule prevents family-planning money from going to any organization that so much as discusses abortion or lobbies for relaxed abortion laws.

The resistance is ideological, driven by politicians trying to curry favor with the religious right. Among evangelical Christian groups, there is growing resistance not just to abortion but also to contraception.

Of Iowa's low level of public funding, even during her husband's tenure as governor, Vilsack blamed resistance from the Republican-majority Legislature and cuts to federal Title 10 funding for pregnancy-prevention initiatives for the low-income. With the Iowa governor's office and Legislature both under Democratic control, Vilsack hopes that will change.

She also hopes the Iowa Initiative, which plans to increase birth-control education and access, will serve as a model for the nation.

Pointing to a range of new contraceptive options available, including safe, effective long-term ones, Vilsack said low-income women not on Medicaid are often unable to access them because of a lack of money or insurance or because their insurance doesn't cover birth control.



A study by the Guttmacher Institute shows that each dollar spent on family planning saves \$3 in social services and maternal and child health care. Though older teens have the highest rate of births due to unintended pregnancies (72 percent), nearly half of births to 20- to 25-year-olds and a quarter of births to women ages 26 to 30 fall into that category. The problem exists "in every corner of the state, across all age ranges and all income levels," Vilsack said.

The Iowa Initiative's 10-member board includes some prominent Iowans, including former Meredith executive Jim Autry, philanthropist Susan Knapp, former Des Moines Register publisher Mary Stier and former state Sen. Maggie Tinsman.

The initiative will probably face some political roadblocks along the way, but it's about time this issue got some attention. Contraception is not a dirty word. It's time to reclaim it from those who try to make it one.

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