

## Telegraph Herald - Dubuque, IA

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# High number of unplanned pregnancies spurs effort

In Iowa, 50% of pregnancies are mistimed or unwanted

BY MARY NEVANS-PEDERSON TH STAFF WRITER

 LISTENNOW



Photo by: Dave Kettering

Christie Vilsack, executive director of The Iowa Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancies, speaks to members of the Telegraph Herald Editorial Board on Monday in Dubuque.

Birth control has never been an easy conversation topic, and in Iowa, tens of thousands of women who don't have ready access to family planning services don't know who to talk to about it.

Leaders of a statewide effort to decrease the number of unplanned pregnancies hope to bring family planning issues to the forefront of community discussions. The Iowa Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancies was launched in January with a first-year grant of \$1.5 million from the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation of Omaha, Neb. Former Iowa First Lady Christie Vilsack was tapped to head the initiative, based in Des Moines.

"We want women to be and stay healthy, and to reduce the number of abortions" through outreach about pregnancy prevention and by increasing access to contraception, Vilsack said. "We want

women to be able to space their children and to decide how many to have.

"We've always thought that if we didn't talk about it, we don't have to deal with it," Vilsack said Monday in a meeting with the Telegraph Herald Editorial Board.

But ignoring family planning issues has resulted in thousands of unwanted pregnancies among Iowa women (about half of all pregnancies, according to researcher Mary Losch at the University of Northern Iowa), which in turn lead some to seek abortions and others to drop out of school or quit work. Taxpayers' cost for prenatal, birth and infant health care for many of the children is in the tens of millions of dollars.

Iowa women of all income levels and racial demographics face many barriers to accessing birth control information and services, Vilsack said.

"Many don't have insurance or their insurance won't cover birth control. If they live in rural areas, the services are often far away and there is no public transportation," she said.

The nonprofit Iowa Initiative will not provide specific contraception information nor contraception itself and will not open new services sites. It will spread its message through "networking, research and public outreach," Vilsack said.

The research at UNI is being done in conjunction with the universities of Iowa and Alabama. The same foundation gave \$11.5 million for projects and research over a five-year period. Losch, assistant director of the UNI Center for Social and Behavioral Research, will direct the research.

### By the numbers:

- \* **1.5 million**: First-year funding.
- \* **Fifty percent** of Iowa pregnancies are unintended (mistimed or unwanted).
- \* By county, unintended pregnancies among live births -- Clayton, **28 percent**; Delaware, **25 percent**; Dubuque, **36 percent**; Jackson, **38 percent**.
- \* Iowa ranks 43rd in providing money for family planning.
- \* Iowa is **48th** in offering access to family planning services.

"We picked projects that could have a high impact, yet be feasible and sustainable," Losch said. If successful, Iowa's effort will serve as a model for other states seeking to reduce unintended pregnancies.


The projects will start in 2009 and include:

- \* Salon project, which will train hair stylists to know basic information on what and where contraception can be accessed. "There is trust and rapport between a woman and her stylist," Losch said.
- \* Community pharmacists will be trained to be comfortable talking about contraception and pharmacy displays will be made more accessible.
- \* Radio serials will be created for Latino and African-American radio stations that include reproductive issues in the story lines.
- \* Social marketing will provide statewide media and advertising campaigns and initiatives targeting the state's college students and places they frequent after hours.


The upcoming opening of a Planned Parenthood clinic in Dubuque fits the Iowa Initiative's goals, Vilsack said, adding that research showed Dubuque to be underserved in the amount and types of contraception services available. Planned Parenthood of East Central Iowa, which will open the Dubuque health center, and Hillcrest Family Services received funding through the initiative, she noted.

"The more access (to family planning services) the better," she said, adding that "talk doesn't promote sex. There are young people in this town having sex and having babies and we need to talk about it."


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