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Christie Vilsack touts Iowa Initiative

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Christie Vilsack speaks about her involvement with The Iowa Initiative, a private foundation working to reduce unintended pregnancies. Vilsack was in Carroll Thursday to visit New Opportunities, which receives funding from the foundation. — Photo by Larry Devine

Christie Vilsack has gone from the Iowa first lady known for her flamboyant hats to crusader against unintended pregnancies.

Vilsack visited Carroll Thursday to make a presentation at New Opportunities, one of 18 reproductive health providers being supported by The Iowa Initiative, a privately funded organization working to reduce the rate of unintended pregnancies among women 18-30.

Executive director of the program for a year and a half, Vilsack has been splitting her time in 2009 between Iowa and Washington, D.C., making promotional swings in the state and being with her husband, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

Vilsack said she agreed to head The Iowa Initiative after learning that more than half of pregnancies among Iowa women age 18-30 are unintended and the state ranks near last in access to family planning services.

"I see it as an opportunity to take my relationship with the people of Iowa and say 'Let's talk at the community level about what is the role of parents, schools, faith-based organizations and government, in this issue of unintended pregnancy,'" she said in an interview with The Times Herald. "I'm simply saying I believe in community and that we can do a better job."

The foundation is awarding grants to reproductive-health providers for providing free long-acting reversible contraceptives, opening satellite clinics and paying competitive wages to nurse practitioners. It's also funding outreach programs and research.

"Everyone has a story. Everyone knows somebody whose life has been derailed by an unintended pregnancy. So my point is, let's have the conversation," Vilsack said.

The foundation is conducting a similar project in Colorado.

"We hope to take what we're doing in Iowa and Colorado and make it a national model," Vilsack said. "At the end of five years we can go to policymakers, governors and legislators and show what works, what doesn't, what needs more research."

Vilsack, a former elementary school teacher who holds a journalism degree, added of her involvement with the foundation, "I am very passionate about it. It gives me an opportunity to teach in a new kind of way."

Her husband became ag secretary four months ago. The Vilsacks have sold their home in Mount Pleasant and are leasing residences there and in Washington.

Tom Vilsack oversees a department with more than 100,000 employees and a budget over \$1 billion. This week he's traveling with Vice President Joe Biden to promote President Obama's stimulus package.

Christie said Tom loves serving as ag secretary because it involves many of his favorite issues, such as renewable fuels, rural development, food safety, homeland security and food entitlements.

"Tom just loves his job," she said. "He thought being governor of Iowa was the very best job in politics, but he is right where he needs to be."

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