

NEWS

Vilsack discusses birth control, unwanted pregnancies[Print Page](#)

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Cindy Iutzi/MVM News Network

Christie Vilsack, former first lady of Iowa, is traveling throughout Iowa to shine a light on a subject usually kept carefully under wraps.

She is talking about sex.

"I come from a family that doesn't talk about any body part that doesn't show," she said.

As executive director of the Iowa Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancy, Vilsack said she is alarmed by the number of unplanned pregnancies in Iowa and the impact they are having on individuals, families, society and the economy. She intends to help reduce those numbers in five years.

"Unplanned pregnancy affects all of us, not only taxpayers, but also social networks," she said Thursday. "If women don't have access to birth control, it changes not only the woman's life, but her parents' and grandparents' lives."

Vilsack told about the early years of her marriage when her husband, Tom Vilsack, who later was elected governor of Iowa, was in law school. Christie taught for three years at \$7,000 per year and as their sole support she could not afford an unplanned pregnancy.

Tom is the result of an unplanned pregnancy. He was born in 1950 in Pittsburgh, Pa., to a 23-year-old woman with an Irish surname. She was the oldest of five children and gave up her newborn to a Catholic orphanage, Christie said.

"That was sobering for me," she said. "All of a sudden I have a face in mind. (The identity of Tom's birth mother has never been known by the Vilsacks). How did she turn out? Is she living? She's 80 and I don't know if she's surrounded by family."

She cited the example of a college student who becomes unintentionally pregnant as an economic factor that also has to be recognized and dealt with.

Often the woman has to quit school to care for and support the child, earning minimum wage instead of being able to enter the workforce at a higher salary level. The reduction in her ability to earn is reflected by the fewer amount of goods she can buy, negatively affecting the local economy.

The cycle continues. Those who do not have access to funds for college or community college because their families can't afford to help are almost guaranteed to earn substantially less than they would with additional education or training. If no opportunity or hope exists for a better future, for some young women, having a baby may be the only power they have over their lives.

"There's more to this than you do it or you don't, or you're a slut or a saint," Vilsack said.

Teenage pregnancies alone cost Iowa \$47 million every year. There are no financial figures for unplanned pregnancies by 18- to 30-year-old women in Iowa, but in 2006, more than 50 percent of the pregnancies in that age group were unplanned.

"Keep that \$47 million in mind," Vilsack said. "How would you spend that money?"

Vilsack said unplanned pregnancy can be prevented by new, long-acting reversible contraceptives that are now available to women, but because Iowa ranks 43rd in the nation in providing funding for family planning, tens of thousands of women don't have access to that type of birth control.

The long-acting reversible, contraceptives include implants that work for three years and are nearly 100 percent effective and a new type of IUD that works just as well.

"We're trying to inform people and move young women to those methods," she said.

Iowa ranks 48th in the nation in access to birth control.

The Iowa Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancies intends to build support for state and federal funding for birth control services and improve access by shedding light on the high social and economic costs paid by young mothers and their communities.

Vilsack highlighted five areas of emphasis to accomplish the five-year goal:

- n Research to keep track of the program and measures results.

- n Equip hairdressers with information to share with clients about taking responsibility and control over their lives.

- n Get the word out by means of Latino soap operas broadcast over the radio.

- n Use Internet features like Facebook and MySpace to reach women from 18 to 30 who talk to each other online.

- n Advocacy, which involves talking to legislators about getting behind the endeavor.

Planned Parenthood and similar women's health organizations are being provided with funds to train more nurse practitioners, pay them higher wages, add more nurse practitioners to clinics and expand opportunities for access to birth control.

"We've been opening clinics on Main Street Iowa," Vilsack said. "We need to get the word out about birth control. We have a problem here with educating people.

"I've been at college campuses talking to your children and grandchildren. I ask them, 'What do you want me to tell your parents?' They say, 'We didn't know anything when we came.' We were not prepared to go off on our own and make wise decisions. We need to get the information before we leave home."

The American culture is all about sex, Vilsack said, and if parents, schools and churches don't talk about sex, not just the body parts and how they work, but about all aspects, children will learn about sex from television, movies and the Internet.

"This is a problem we can do something about," she said. "It requires community response. If you're not willing to talk about it in a public place, it's like a sin of omission. We want to try and move these numbers.

"And this also is about taking care of the least among us, taking care of the most vulnerable."

Vilsack wants Iowa to become a model of how to reduce unplanned pregnancies for the rest of the country.

"And bottom line, if you reduce the number of unintended pregnancies, you reduce the need for abortions, invasive medical procedures," she said.

Vilsack came to Keokuk for the open house at the new location of Planned Parenthood, 1626 Morgan St.

She also spoke to the Keokuk Rotary Club.

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