

**Statement of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice on Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs and the Need for Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

**House of Representatives**

**Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Submitted for the Record  
April 23, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony on the issue of abstinence-only programs.

RCRC is an interfaith alliance of national mainstream religious organizations dedicated to ensuring access to reproductive health care and achieving reproductive justice. For nearly 35 years, RCRC has brought together national religious and religiously affiliated organizations from 15 denominations and traditions. Our membership includes the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church (the General Board of Church and Society and Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries), the Unitarian Universalist Association; and Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative Judaism. RCRC is a strong voice on behalf of women of color, the poor, youth and other underserved populations.

**Support of religious communities for comprehensive sexuality education**

Major faith traditions representing millions of Americans support comprehensive sexuality education. In keeping with our nation's constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, they oppose civil laws that would impose specific religious views about sexuality education on all Americans.

These faith communities take seriously their duty to instill a set of religious and moral values that will help guide young people to responsible life choices. They believe that it is the role of government to ensure that the nation's youth receive the facts - unblemished by ideology - that will protect them from disease and unintended pregnancy.

RCRC has compiled excerpts of official statements of religious denominations and traditions on the importance of sexuality education. We have attached a copy of the complete document, *Religious communities and sex education: in the Home, In the Congregation, in the Schools*, for your review. But to give you a brief sense of these statements, please consider the following:

**United Methodist Church:**

“Children, youth and adults need opportunities to discuss sexuality and learn from quality sex education materials in families, churches and schools.”

**United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**

“...supports comprehensive sex education...calls upon the U.S. Congress to cease funding of abstinence only education.”

**Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

“...supports...comprehensive school health education that includes age and developmentally appropriate sexuality education in all grades...”

**Muslim Women’s League**

“Sex education can be taught in a way that informs young people about sexuality in scientific and moral terms.”

**Episcopal Church**

“...we encourage the members of this Church to give strong support to responsible local public and private school programs of education in human sexuality.”

**How did you learn about sex?**

Earlier this year, RCRC put out a request to “tell us your story: how did you learn about sex?” We received well over 300 responses from individuals around the country age 17 through 94. These replies offer thoughtful reflections and often intimate, sometimes painful, glimpses into personal lives.

Among other things, we found that what you learn - or don’t learn - as a young person can have life-long repercussions. And abstinence-only programs, by their design, leave out important health information.

If I had known what sex was, I would have understood what was happening to me when I was molested by a male relative beginning at age 8. - Deborah, 45

I wish I’d learned what intercourse was and how easy it is to get pregnant. - anon, 79

I wish I’d learned about STDs and the way in which they can be transmitted. I was under the impression that oral sex was safe, since you couldn’t get pregnant from it. - Miranda, 26

The good girl/bad girl images prevalent when I was young only served to instill a great deal of fear in me, which negatively impacted on my marriage for years. - anon, 57

**Communities of color**

In the year 2000, RCRC was honored to have former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders address our annual National Black Religious Summit on Sexuality. According to Dr. Elders, “our problem with sexuality has contributed more to the poverty in the black community than anything else in our society. A pregnant teenager who does not finish high school or marry has an 80% likelihood of being poor.” She challenged Congress to “stop legislating morals and start teaching responsibility.” Now, it is eight years and

\$1.3 billion of abstinence-only education later and a low income woman is four times as likely to have an unintended pregnancy, five times as likely to have an unintended birth and more than four times as likely to have an abortion as her higher-income counterpart. It is the poor and communities of color who suffer from illogical and ineffective public policy.

RCRC addresses these issues through our National Black Church Initiative, a program begun in 1997 to “break the silence” about sex and sexuality in the African American community. The initiative assists Black clergy and laity in addressing teenage pregnancy, sexuality education and reproductive health within the context of African American religion and culture. We have worked in over 700 churches providing our “Keeping It Real!” faith based sexuality education curriculum to more than 7,000 young men and women. We have a similar faith based initiative, La Iniciativa Latina (LIL), which provides model programs on sexuality and reproductive health for Latino youth, adults and clergy in the context of Latino values, religion and culture.

But the answer to the nation’s high rate of unintended pregnancy and pandemic of sexually transmitted diseases does not rest with churches and non-profit organizations alone. Public schools must be part of the solution. We are morally compelled to empower our young people with the knowledge to make responsible decisions. As Dr. Elders so succinctly stated, “Vows of abstinence break more easily than latex condoms.” According to the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics, in 2002, the pregnancy rates for black and Hispanic teenagers were each more than two and one-half times the rate for white teenagers. This is the reality.

One of the most compelling arguments for comprehensive sexuality education was made by a member of our youth program, a proud Pentecostal Christian from rural Mississippi. In a meeting with her Member of Congress, she explained that there was no sex education in her high school and a lot of girls in her class got “knocked up.” They did not graduate from high school. They did not marry. Their futures were compromised. But the impact of these unintended pregnancies goes well beyond the lives of these young women and their children. They contribute to the economic depression of their communities.

### **In conclusion**

We believe that being of faith means being engaged in the world. And like it or not, the facts are clear: 95 percent of Americans have sex before marriage, 80 percent of teen pregnancies are unintended and each year, 25 percent of American teens contract an STD. We want our young people to be safe. For that to happen, they must be informed by comprehensive sex education. Offering them anything less is irresponsible, dangerous and wrong.