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An Antiabortion Republican Is Pushing for Free Birth Control: Here's Why

When it comes to birth control and teens, experts are learning that pushing condoms and the pill may not be the best way to prevent the costly problem of unintended pregnancies. Pills are forgotten. Condoms aren't always available or thought of when the mood strikes.

How pricey are all those accidental teen pregnancies? State and federal governments spent \$21 billion in 2010 alone on pregnancy-related care through public insurance programs, according to a report released last month from the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive rights advocacy group.

That's why Colorado legislators are trying to preserve a program that's been successful in reducing teen pregnancies by taking a different approach. By providing IUDs and birth control implants—devices that are introduced to the womb or under the skin to prevent pregnancy—Colorado has seen a remarkable dip in teen pregnancy.

Over the course of five years, this initiative has already provided 30,000 IUDs and implants to Colorado women, and within this period, the teen birth rate dropped 40 percent, according to Gov. John Hickenlooper's office.

This is why Colorado Rep. Don Coram—a noted antiabortion Republican—cosponsored a bill to extend funding on the state's family-planning initiative.

"That's a pretty good return on investment," he told TakePart, saying for every \$1 Colorado has already spent on it, the state saved \$5.

If an antiabortion Republican like Coram can see the benefit in birth control, he says there may be hope for every state in the fight to reduce unplanned pregnancies.

He has some advice for other party politicians. "Get your head out of the sand. This is a problem, and it's a solvable problem," Coram said.

Coram and state legislators are pushing for a bill that would funnel \$5 million toward the pregnancy-prevention program, which jumped its first hurdle by being approved in a House committee last week. It would extend funding for a wildly successful initiative scheduled to end this June. Experts are applauding the move.

"At a time when the phrase 'game changer' is painfully overused, this Colorado initiative really was a game changer," said Bill Albert, chief program officer at The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

More than \$23 million in grant money from The Susan Buffett Thompson Foundation went into building the program. Now it's time for Colorado legislators to pony up the cash to extend the program.

"An investment in low-maintenance, highly effective methods of contraception is much cheaper than the outlays that are attached to unplanned pregnancies," said Albert.

An IUD or implant can cost up to \$900, but this figure is dwarfed by what it costs to have a baby. The average expense of a publicly funded birth hovers around \$13,000 for everything from prenatal care, to labor, delivery, and a year of infant care, according to the Guttmacher report—which is why extensive research has shown that investing in family-planning services isn't just helpful for women, but for their communities as a whole.

"In short, prevention saves money," said Albert.

Nationally, rates of teen pregnancy have been declining for the past two decades, he said, but there were still more than 300,000 babies born to women between the ages of 15 and 19 in 2012, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Rates of unintended pregnancies are higher among low-income women, with this demographic being five times more likely to have an unintended birth as an affluent women, according to a recent report from Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

So while part of Colorado's success may be its focus on providing free or cheap contraception to low-income women, its "off the charts" success is due in part to its emphasis on long-term, birth control methods. These forms of contraception don't require a "game-time decision," said Albert. Women can, in a sense, "set it and forget it," which can be especially useful for teenagers who often have sex sporadically, he said. IUDs make financial sense as well.

“If you think of the cost of monthly birth control pills over three, five, seven years—that is much more expensive than the initial outlay of an IUD,” said Albert.

Efforts in other states have proven successful too. In 2007, researchers launched the Contraceptive CHOICE Project at Washington University in St. Louis and over the course of four years enrolled more than 9,000 women in a study on birth control. What researchers found was that when properly educated on long-acting contraceptives, women tended to choose these over more commonly used methods like the pill. They had much lower rates of unintended pregnancies as a result.

In 2007, Iowa used another multimillion-dollar grant from The Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation to fund long-term birth control for thousands of women in the state. Over the course of a few years, unplanned pregnancy rates dropped 4 percent, “one of the biggest declines in Midwestern states at that time,” according to The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Yet there are only so many generous donors, so it is up to policy makers to invest public money in prevention and reap the savings in the long run now that a private funder’s approach has proven solid. In Colorado, funding runs out in June if Coram’s legislation isn’t approved.

In Indiana, meanwhile, a bill aimed at lowering teen pregnancy recently failed to make it out of legislative committee.

Advocates for teen health say that comprehensive, medically accurate sex education is a vital tool in combatting teen pregnancy.

“We need a human sexuality education mandate in this country,” UCLA’s Wyatt said. “If we had a requirement that every kid by the time they’re 10 knows about human anatomy and where babies are made, we’d see a big reduction in teen pregnancy.”