



January 20, 2011

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 404E  
Washington, D.C. 20201  
*Via email: findyouthinfo@air.org*

RE: Strategic Plan for Federal Youth Policy

To Whom It May Concern:

Health is fundamental to the success of our young people. We urge you to consider the importance of comprehensive sexuality education as well as sexual health prevention programming, both in schools and youth-serving programs, as you assess priority youth services. Youth face the triple threat of unintended pregnancies, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections. Yet prevention of each of these is possible through effective education and outreach. Preventive education and services are necessary to ensure that young people live long, productive lives, free of chronic illness and unplanned pregnancy.

HIV diagnoses among young people in the United States are rising. In 2008 there were 7,328 new HIV diagnoses among young people ages 13-24 in the 37 states with confidential name-based HIV infection reporting. With some minor variation, the number of AIDS diagnoses among 13-19 year olds has risen nearly consistently since 1998. The burden of these new infections disproportionately impacts Black youth. While only 17% of young people aged 13-19 are Black, a full 75% of those newly diagnosed in this age group are Black.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, sexually transmitted infection rates among young people are alarmingly high. A CDC study has estimated that one in four young women between the ages of 14 and 19 in the U.S. – or 3.2 million teenage girls – is infected with at least one of the most common sexually

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “HIV Surveillance Among Adolescents and Young Adults.” December 1, 2010. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/slides/adolescents/slides/Adolescents.pdf>



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transmitted diseases (human papillomavirus (HPV), chlamydia, herpes simplex virus, and trichomoniasis). Again, young Black women are most severely affected: nearly half of the young Black women (48 percent) were infected with an STD, compared to 20 percent of young white women.<sup>2</sup> Too many young people are not getting the HIV and STI prevention education they need.

Teen pregnancy rates also remain too high. In 2006, there were 750,000 pregnancies among women under 20; in other words, about 7% of young women in this age-group became pregnant. The numbers are even starker when considering only those teenagers who were sexually experienced: a full 15% of 15-19 year old females who had ever had intercourse became pregnant.<sup>3</sup> Clearly too many teenagers are not getting the sexual education necessary to help them avoid unplanned pregnancies.

At the same time, young people are not getting the preventive services they need. Another CDC study found that while the majority of sexually active 15- to-24 year-old young women (82%) receive contraceptive services or STD/HIV services, only about one third (39%) receive both types of services. In addition, only 38% of a subset of young women who reported receiving contraceptive services associated with unprotected sex (e.g., pregnancy testing) also received STD/HIV counseling, testing or treatment.<sup>4</sup> In other words, many young women at high risk for infection are not receiving necessary prevention services, and opportunities to provide these services are routinely missed.

Many of the same factors that put adults at risk for HIV affect young people as well. Young women, and Black young women most especially, are at risk for HIV infection through heterosexual contact. But certain risk factors are unique to young people. Young women often experience unequal power dynamics in relationships with male partners, making condom use particularly difficult to enforce. And many young women are in relationships with older men, who may be more likely to have HIV, and/or more likely to control the dynamic related to use of birth control. Young people who have run away from home regularly rely on survival sex-- the exchange of sex for money, shelter, protection, drugs, food, or

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<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Nationally Representative CDC Study Finds 1 in 4 Teenage Girls Has a Sexually Transmitted Disease." March 11, 2008. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/stdconference/2008/press/release-11march2008.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Guttmacher Institute. "U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions: National and State Trends and Trends by Race and Ethnicity." January 2010. Available at <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPtrends.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Nationally Representative CDC Study Finds 1 in 4 Teenage Girls Has a Sexually Transmitted Disease." March 11, 2008. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/stdconference/2008/press/release-11march2008.htm>



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other necessities-- putting themselves at heightened risk of infection. Further, research has shown that a significant proportion of young people are not worried about HIV infection.<sup>5</sup>

In order to ensure that young people receive the prevention education and services they need, we recommend the following:

- Urge Congress to eliminate all funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, and instead fund programs that provide medically-accurate, age-appropriate comprehensive sex education.
- Urge Congress and the President to protect the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents through educational programming that is comprehensive in nature, and not limited to the single issue of teen pregnancy prevention.
- Urge Community Health Centers, family planning centers, and other health care providers serving adolescents to make conversations about HIV and STIs routine, and to make the offer of confidential HIV and STI testing a routine part of preventative care for adolescents in health care settings.
- Increase access to confidential, preventative health care for adolescents in schools and community-based settings.
- Increase access to routine, voluntary, confidential HIV screening for youth.
- Promote condom availability programs in youth-friendly settings.
- Promote and support peer-to-peer HIV prevention programs.
- Foster participation from young people-- both males and females-- in prevention efforts.



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<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "CDC HIV/AIDS Factsheet: HIV/AIDS Among Youth." August 2008. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/PDF/youth.pdf>

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important strategic plan, and we welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further. Please feel free to contact me at 212.577.3001 x239 or [ayager@hivlawproject.org](mailto:ayager@hivlawproject.org) with any further questions.

Sincerely,

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