

Napolitano rejects abstinence-only funds

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — Arizona will take money again from the federal government to convince teens to abstain from premarital sex only when the state also can use the money to teach teens who are having sex how to prevent getting pregnant, Gov. Janet Napolitano said.

The governor said Wednesday that she had in prior years agreed to accept the more than \$1 million a year from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "in part to see whether it worked." The "it" is the requirement that the federal dollars, matched by about \$750,000 in state funds, be used solely to promote the idea of abstinence prior to marriage.

"While we all support 'abstinence only' and don't believe, in particular, teenagers ought to be engaging in sexual relations of that sort, the fact of the matter is, some do," the governor explained. "They need to have complete information for their own health, for their own bodies."

And the governor said "every study" on abstinence-only programs shows they do not decrease teen pregnancy.

Instead, Napolitano wants to divert some of those state funds to a program to provide sex education, contraceptives and screening for sexually transmitted diseases for community college students. And the rest would expand eligibility for publicly funded family planning programs.

The governor's conclusion that abstinence-only programs don't work is not shared by everyone.

State Rep. Mark Anderson, R-Mesa, who has championed these programs for years, had his own citations. He said studies of programs like those that ask teens to take "virginity pledges" show it does reduce sexual activity in teens.

And even the state Department of Health Services in 2001 credited the state's "Sex Can Wait" program, started two years earlier, for Arizona's lowest teen pregnancy rate since 1950. That, however, was before Napolitano took office two years later.

The governor also said there is more recent evidence, citing in particular a study last year by the Department of Health and Human Services. It found that teens in abstinence-only programs "were no more likely than youth who were assigned to the 'services as usual' control group to have abstained from sex."

Napolitano, in a letter to federal health officials rejecting future funds, said she does believe in education that "strongly promotes abstinence." But she said she would accept those federal dollars again only when they also can be used for "a curriculum that provides comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education."

Current federal restrictions say the funds can be used only for programs that teach that abstinence from sex outside of marriage is the "expected standard for all school-age children."

Programs also must teach that sex outside of marriage "is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects" and that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

And they must teach young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to unwanted sex.

State health officials said they have 15 contracts with organizations that use the funding to provide abstinence-only programs, both during and after school.

Agency spokesman Michael Murphy said these programs served more than 28,000 youngsters in the last fiscal year. Another 2,350 parents also were trained in how to promote abstinence.

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