

Pawlenty rejects \$850,000 federal grant for sex ed

Meanwhile, he OK'd a \$500,000 federal grant for abstinence-only teen education, requiring a state match of \$379,000.

By **JOSEPHINE MARCOTTY**, Star Tribune

August 30, 2010

Gov. Tim Pawlenty has rejected a federal teen pregnancy prevention grant worth \$850,000, with no strings attached, while giving his approval for \$500,000 in abstinence-only money that will cost the state \$379,000 in matching funds.

The Minnesota Department of Health wanted to apply for both grants, which are funded through the federal health care overhaul passed in March, said state Health Commissioner Dr. Sanne Magnan. Pawlenty, a longtime supporter of abstinence-only sex education, chose to submit just one application to the federal government, she said.

A spokesman for Pawlenty said the governor turned down the larger grant because "he is striving to find ways to stop" the implementation of health reform in Minnesota, even though both grants were funded by the health care legislation.

But on Monday the governor's decision sparked an outcry from adolescent health experts and political opponents, who said he was putting his national political ambitions ahead of the health of young Minnesotans -- at a time when the state faces daunting budget shortfalls.

Sexually transmitted infections among teenagers are skyrocketing, and in Minnesota minority teens have significantly higher rates of both teen pregnancy and STIs than the national average. The grant Pawlenty rejected could have paid for providing teenagers with information on contraception and disease prevention, in addition to encouraging teens to delay sexual activity.

"It's really, really sad to discount young people this way," said Brigid Riley, executive director of MOAPPP, the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting.

But Tom Prichard, head of the Minnesota Family Council and a proponent of abstinence-only sex education, said he was pleased with Pawlenty's decision. "It's better to spend no money on sex education if it's going to have a condom message," Prichard said. "You are pouring fuel on the fire."

Others said that with looming state and federal deficits, neither the state nor federal government should be spending on sex education of any kind. "I'm not convinced that either one would do much good," said state Rep. Jim Abeler, R-Anoka.

At one time Minnesota received \$2 million a year from the federal government to fund school-based abstinence-only sex education, which emphasizes sexual abstinence until marriage as the only sure way to avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexual diseases.

But in 2007 the state quietly started saying no thank you to the money, largely because that approach had

been discounted by national and state studies.

In 2004, a state study found that sexual activity among junior high school students who received abstinence-only instruction increased at the same rates as among other kids. In 2007, a congressionally mandated study found the same pattern nationally among both elementary and middle school students.

Prichard said there have been other studies showing such programs to be effective.

Both programs funded

The federal health care legislation that President Obama signed in March provides funding for both kinds of sex education. The Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) is awarded without matching money, and Minnesota could get \$850,000. But the abstinence-only program requires states to provide a 75 percent match. Minnesota is eligible for \$505,743 in federal funding, but must provide \$379,307.

"It's unfortunate that he would reject federal funding for something that does work," said Sen. Linda Berglin, DFL-Mpls, a leading voice on health care issues at the Legislature.

Magnan said she did not discuss the grant proposals with Pawlenty, but submitted both for his consideration. She declined to say whether she agreed with his decision, or why the state chose to apply for the abstinence-only money.

But in contrast to previous rules governing the abstinence-only program, the new law requires states to provide medically accurate information to teenagers. Many abstinence-only curricula have provided students with inaccurate information about the effectiveness of condoms in preventing diseases and pregnancy, critics say.

Michael Resnick, a professor and adolescent health researcher at the University of Minnesota, said that broad-based sex education that provides biologically accurate information and social skills has been proven most effective at persuading kids to postpone sexual activity.

"There is no excuse for turning away from this opportunity," he said of Pawlenty's decision.

Josephine Marcotty • 612-673-7394