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## Rift Grows Over Unintended Pregnancies

By DAVID CRARY

America's conflicted attitude toward sex is at the heart of an intriguing political struggle unfolding this year in Congress and many states, as liberals and conservatives spar over bills aimed at reducing the huge number of unintended pregnancies. To the liberal coalition backing the measures, the so-called Prevention First initiative is a commonsense package that would reduce the need for abortions by providing better information about contraceptives and expanding access to them. To conservatives, the initiative is an alarming effort to eliminate abstinence-only sex education, strengthen abortion-rights groups and encourage sex outside of marriage.

"There's a utopian view that women ought to be able to have sex any time they want to without consequences — that's the bottom line of all these bills," said Janice Crouse of Concerned Women for America, a conservative group which opposes the measures.

The initiative's centerpiece is a comprehensive federal bill, the Prevention First Act, which went nowhere when first introduced in the Republican-controlled Congress in 2005. It now has bright prospects with the Democrats in power; Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is its principal Senate sponsor. The bill would increase funding for family planning clinics, expand Medicaid and private health insurance coverage of contraceptives, require hospitals to make emergency contraception available to rape victims, and allocate money for comprehensive sex education programs that teach youths about birth control as well as abstinence.

A separate bill introduced this week would ensure that women can access contraceptives at pharmacies regardless of whether any employee they encounter has moral objections.

The lead House sponsor of the Prevention First Act, Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., promoted the bill Thursday at the National

Press Club — declaring that it would "give women the tools they need to make the best possible decisions for themselves."

While some conservative leaders predict President Bush would veto the measure, Slaughter is unsure what he might do. "All of us would like to see fewer abortions," she said in a telephone interview. "The question is how we can accomplish that."

Statistics cited by Slaughter indicate that the United States has one of the highest rates of unintended pregnancies among industrialized nations — roughly 3 million a year, or nearly half the total number of pregnancies. While many women give birth to babies they did not plan on, about 1.3 million a year have abortions. Groups that support abortion rights, including Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice America, endorse Prevention First and have pushed for similar measures at the state level. They are heartened by numerous successes this year — including several in states where Democrats gained power from Republicans in 2006.

"We saw the opportunity to go on the offensive really aggressively," said NARAL's president, Nancy Keenan. "Now we're seeing the results."

Two states — Washington and Colorado — passed laws prohibiting abstinence-only sex education at public schools. Five states — Arkansas, Connecticut, Colorado, Minnesota and Oregon — enacted laws requiring hospitals to offer emergency contraception to rape victims or provide them with information on where to obtain the pills. Connecticut's measure, which covers all hospitals, including Roman Catholic ones, was signed into law by Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell despite opposition from Catholic bishops. The Oregon measure also requires private insurers to cover prescription birth control if they cover other prescription drugs.

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Jackie Payne, Planned Parenthood's director of government relations, said the state developments suggest there is strong public support for Prevention First's goals — but she is unsure how the issue will play out on Capitol Hill. "The Republican Party is trying to figure out what they stand for these days," she said. "If they pay attention to what voters want, they'll want to see common-sense measures like this." If the measures do reach the White House, Payne said, "the president will show himself to be extremely outside the mainstream if he decides to veto them."

Prevention First is depicted by its backers as a quest for "common ground" in the long-running debate over abortion. Conservative critics reject this premise, insisting that genuine compromise would include support for abstinence outside of marriage.

"They say they're searching for common ground, but it's more likely they're looking for more funding for Planned Parenthood," said Tom McClusky, the Family Research Council's vice president for government affairs. Both liberals and conservatives claim their preferred style of sex education — comprehensive or abstinence-only — is behind a recent drop in the teen pregnancy rate.

But Sarah Brown, who heads the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said most Americans don't realize that women in their 20s, not teens, account for the largest number of unwanted pregnancies. "We have an enormous public education task to help the public understand it's not just teens," Brown said. "We are not very good at contraception in this country. The path to fewer unwanted pregnancies "is very simple — you either don't have sex or you use contraception carefully, every single time." Brown said. "If we talk about personal responsibility as well as responsible policies, we may then be building common ground."