

# Briefly...

## President Obama's Budget Proposal for Preventing Teen Pregnancy: Thoughts from The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

As an organization dedicated to preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy and deeply committed to research and evidence, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy strongly supports President Obama's budget proposal for funding evidence-based programs to prevent teen pregnancy. This proposal emphasizes good science, encourages research and innovation, and increases the overall investment in preventing too-early pregnancy and parenthood at a time when the teen birth rate is on the rise.

**An Important and Timely Investment.** The President's proposal is the first and only funding stream dedicated to preventing teen pregnancy through proven, effective efforts. At a time when the teen birth rate has increased for two years straight and when state, local, and private funding for such programs is drying up, the President's initiative is particularly important and timely.

The proposed initiative to prevent teen pregnancy responds powerfully and immediately to the sobering news that the teen birth rate—after 14 consecutive years of decline—has now risen two years in a row, raising the possibility that one of the nation's great success stories of the past two decades is in danger of unraveling. Positive trends in teen sexual activity and contraceptive use seem to be reversing and many states are reporting increases in their rates of teen pregnancy.

Funding evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs—many of which also combat sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV—will help reduce too early pregnancy and parenthood, which in turn will help reduce poverty, improve educational achievement, strengthen the workforce, improve child well-being, strengthen families, reduce the need for abortion (even though most abortions occur to adult women, not teens) and reduce costs as well.

**Emphasizing Good Science.** The hallmark of the President's teen pregnancy prevention proposal—and of the Administration's

approach to a number of issues—is a strong focus on evidence. At present, the overwhelming weight of scientific evidence supports those interventions that both encourage teens to delay sexual activity and that encourage sexually active teens to use contraception consistently and carefully. Effective teen pregnancy prevention interventions use a range of approaches including curricula-based sex and STI/HIV education (some of which take place during school time, some after-school, and some in community settings), youth development and community service, community-wide programs, parent involvement, and more.

Writing recently about teen pregnancy in the context of the Administration's commitment to using rigorous evidence, Peter Orszag, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, noted that the Administration is using a two-tiered approach for teen pregnancy prevention by "providing more money to programs that generate results backed up by strong evidence. That's the top tier. Then, for an additional group of programs, with some supportive evidence but not as much, we've said: Let's try those too, but rigorously evaluate them and see whether they work." Orszag goes on to point out, "we haven't simply created a block grant and told state they can do whatever they want, nor have we dictated a particular program design and told everyone to follow it. Instead, we've said that we're flexible about the details of the program; we only insist that most of the money go toward the programs backed by the best available evidence, and the rest to programs that are promising and willing to test their mettle."

What is being proposed for teen pregnancy prevention is part of the President's broader commitment to spending taxpayer dollars on research, evaluation, innovation and proven interventions. During challenging economic times when there are countless other pressing priorities to be addressed—health care reform, the economy and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to name just a few—and given the recent increase in the teen birth rate, it is more important than ever that precious public dollars be devoted to those interventions that have evidence of success. The President's budget proposal on teen pregnancy does just that.

**Supporting Innovation.** Although the list of rigorously evaluated program to prevent teen pregnancy has expanded in recent years, there is still much to learn about delaying teens' sexual activity, improving contraceptive use among sexually active teens, and helping young people avoid unplanned pregnancy and STIs. We also need to develop effective programs that focus on underserved populations such as youth in foster care, find new ways to use digital technology to reach teens directly, and focus more intensely on healthy relationships.

In short, more research is needed to expand the number and types of high-quality, evidence-based programs available to meet the needs of diverse communities nationwide. Because of this need to keep learning, we applaud the fact that the President's proposal includes \$25 million for research, evaluation, and innovation.

**Competitive and Mandatory Spending.** Given all this, a substantial investment in evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs is an appropriate approach. There is real merit in a commitment of discretionary funding primarily for competitive grants to a wide range of applicants—state, local, and tribal governments, schools, public and private institutions of higher education, non-profits, community and faith-based groups, and others. At the same time, given the enormous need, it also makes good sense to couple this with at least \$50 million in mandatory funding for states, territories and tribes to use for teen pregnancy prevention, as the President has proposed. This two-pronged approach would increase the total investment in reducing teen pregnancy—a big challenge in a big country—and also diversify the funding streams. In particular, mandatory funding provides more stable, consistent resources that help states, tribes, and territories to plan for longer-term programs.

**A Focused Approach with Multiple Benefits.** The Administration's "Congressional Justification" makes clear that the funding would support evidence-based models that provide medically-accurate and age-appropriate resources to reduce the risks of pregnancy and STIs. As noted earlier, the good news is that many evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs

also have been shown to reduce the incidence of STIs and HIV. In fact, some were initially developed for this purpose. For example, there is significant overlap between CDC's Effective Behavioral Interventions focused specifically on STI/HIV prevention among youth and evidence-based programs to prevent teen pregnancy. Five of the nine "best evidence" programs for HIV prevention among high-risk youth listed as part of CDC's Diffusion of Effective Behavioral Interventions (DEBI) project are also effective teen pregnancy prevention programs. In addition, nearly all evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs have been shown to delay sex and/or increase condom/contraceptive use—behaviors that are, of course, critical not only in decreasing the likelihood of too-early pregnancy but also in reducing the incidence of STIs and HIV/AIDS. Moreover, some of the programs have shown positive effects on educational achievement, which is absolutely critical for success in today's economy.

**Bottom Line.** The Administration has proposed an historic investment in evidence-based programs to prevent teen pregnancy, thereby addressing a serious and increasing national challenge. It is now up to Congress to act on this proposal. While there may be some differences of opinion on a few of the proposal's points among people who work intensely on these issues, we believe these differences are relatively minor compared to the opportunity offered by this new idea and the vision behind it.

In our view, it is critical that discussions about how to fine tune this initiative not become so heated that Congressional and Administration support for it is "scared off" and the entire subject dropped because it all seems just too controversial and contentious. In this context, we recall the stimulus bill debate a few months ago during which a common-sense proposal to expand family planning services to low-income women turned into such a political hot potato that the proposal was withdrawn altogether.

The lesson is clear: discussions about this bold proposal must not become so testy that policymakers who already face a whole host of pressing challenges turn away from this area entirely. That would be a real lost opportunity.