

Statement by Shelby Knox

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

House of Representatives

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Good morning Chairman Henry Waxman, Ranking Member Tom Davis, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. My name is Shelby Knox and I am a twenty-one year old speaker, writer, and sexual health educator. It is an honor to be here to share my personal experience with abstinence-only programs and to provide a youth perspective on their appropriateness and effectiveness.

Purity Pledges: Efficacy and Side-Effects

I was born and raised in a Southern Baptist family in Lubbock, Texas – a city with some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in the nation. At fifteen, in accordance with my faith, I took a virginity pledge as part of a ceremony at my church. Even though I was well past puberty, I still held an embarrassingly vague notion of the physiological definition of the act we were told to avoid. The pastor reiterated throughout the virginity pledge discussion how disappointed our parents, church, and future spouse would be if we relinquished our virginity before marriage. Some of my friends already intimately understood this pressure – they were having sex, but taking the pledge to appease their suspicious parents or to inoculate themselves against the slurs reserved for those whose refusal to pledge was seen as a de facto admission of sexual sin.

While purity pledges were first the domain of religious abstinence-only programs presented in churches, they have gained popularity in secular, school-based abstinence-only programs in recent years. In fact, many of the programs participating in the evaluation of federally funded Title V abstinence-only-until-marriage programs contain some version of a virginity pledge. New research has shown that this component is not only ineffective, but may actually be harmful because they undermine contraceptive use and inadvertently promote risky oral and anal sex among teens who see these activities as a “loophole” in their pledge.

A study done on the virginity pledges found that teenagers who sign a pledge do delay sexual activity eighteen months longer than their peers who did not pledge – far short of marriage – but are one-third less likely to use contraception upon initiating sexual activity than students who did not pledge.¹ Students who pledged also have the same rates of sexually transmitted infections as their non-pledging peers, but are less likely to seek

¹ Peter Bearman and Hanah Brückner, “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and the Transition to First Intercourse,” *American Journal of Sociology* 106.4 (2001): 859-912.

testing or treatment for a sexually transmitted infection.² In addition, male and female pledgers are six times more likely to engage in oral sex than peers who have not pledged, and male pledgers are four times more likely to engage in anal sex than their non-pledging contemporaries.³

Abstinence-Only Programming in the Public Schools: What's Actually Being Taught?

The same pastor who officiated at the religious pledge ceremony also presented a secularized abstinence-only program to junior high and high school students in my school district. Although he still refused to give an exact definition of sex in this setting, he did go into detail about the ineffectiveness of condoms, explaining in graphic detail, and with even more graphic pictures, the sexually transmitted infections students could get if we trusted our health to a “flimsy piece of latex.” We were all too intimidated or embarrassed to ask for clarification, but it seemed as if sex with a condom was equivalent to sex without one.

Another demonstration left little doubt as to our worth as a future spouse or partner if we were to engage in sex before marriage. He pulled an often squirming and reluctant and always female volunteer onto the stage, took out a toothbrush that looked like it had been used to scrub toilets and asked if she would brush her teeth with it. When she predictably refused, he pulled out another toothbrush, this one pristine in its original box, and asked her if she would brush her teeth with that one. When she answered in the affirmative, he turned to the assembly and said, “If you have sex before marriage, you are the dirty toothbrush.”

Federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs commonly use messages of fear and shame, present gender stereotypes as scientific fact, and impart confusing, incomplete, or plainly inaccurate information about condoms and other forms of contraception. In fact, a 2004 survey conducted by the minority staff of this Committee found that 11 of the 13 federally funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs reviewed contained “false, misleading, or distorted information.”⁴

Sexuality Education: What Works? What Doesn't?

When I got to high school, I realized many of my peers were struggling with the same questions about sex, relationships, and sexuality as I was – and most were not abstaining from sex. The statistics became alarmingly personal when the girl who sat next to me in math class got pregnant. She told me her boyfriend had said she couldn't get pregnant the first time she had sex – her growing belly was the result of that first and only time. I

² Peter Bearman and Hanah Brückner, “After the promise: The STD consequences of adolescent virginity pledges,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 36.4 (2005): 271-278.

³ Ibid.

⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform. *The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs*, Prepared for Rep. Henry A. Waxman. Washington, DC: Author, 2004.

watched as her pregnancy advanced and she endured the cruelty of “righteous” high school students in the form of whispered insults and disgusted stares. One day she simply didn’t come back to school.

Another friend had a scare after both condoms he and his partner were using broke – they had figured, wrongly, that if one wouldn’t work, two might do the trick. If either of these two friends had received even the most basic sex education instead of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that withheld information and vilified condoms as ineffective, they would have been able to make better and more informed decisions. Knowledge is power. The ignorance promoted by abstinence-only-until-marriage programs is a recipe for disaster that plays out everyday in communities like mine.

I believed in abstinence in a religious sense, but it was clear that abstinence-only as a policy for students who simply were not abstaining was dangerous. Even if we did wait until marriage, we still lacked a basic understanding of our bodies, reproduction and how to prevent pregnancy as well as a long list of sexually transmitted infections, and the skills to navigate conversations about sex and protection.

Studies have repeatedly shown abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula to be ineffective as well as inaccurate. A federally funded evaluation of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and released in 2007 showed the programs had little effect on teen sexual behavior.⁵ Another 2007 study commissioned by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy came to an identical conclusion. And in 2006, the Society for Adolescent Medicine released a paper that found “the efficacy of abstinence-only interventions may approach zero.”⁶

Comprehensive sex education programs, on the other hand, include age-appropriate, medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality including human development, relationships, decision-making, abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention. And, unlike abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, they actually work: A study released in March 2008 in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that teens receiving comprehensive sex education had lower rates of teen pregnancy than peers who received either abstinence-only or nothing at all. Parents also overwhelmingly support comprehensive sexuality education. A study featured in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that 89% of parents surveyed favored teaching about abstinence and contraception.

Conclusion: Eliminate Funding for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs

⁵ Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. *Impact of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs (Final Report.)* Princeton, NJ: MPR, 2005.

⁶ J. Santelli *et al.* Abstinence-only education policies and programs: a position paper of the Society for Adolescent Medicine. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 2006; 38: 83-87.

It is a perilous and confusing time to be young in the United States: just this year the CDC announced that teen birth rates are up for the first time in sixteen years and that one in four teen girls has a sexually transmitted infection. Although the research has yet to be completed on the male half of the population, it's clear that something must be done to reverse these startling trends.

Abstinence works. Abstinence-only-until-marriage does not. In fact, studies have shown a more comprehensive approach to sex education that gives us strong messages about abstinence and information about condoms and contraception, do a better job of helping young people abstain than do abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. So why is it that there is not a single federal dollar dedicated to a comprehensive approach while more than a billion has been spent on abstinence-only-until-marriage?

As a young person with firsthand experience about the misinformation, shame, guilt, and intolerance propagated by these programs, I urge you to eliminate funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and instead to allocate those funds to comprehensive, medically accurate sex education that provides young people with the tools they need to make responsible, informed decisions about their sexual health.

Once again, it was an honor to speak to you today. I will be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time.