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Web site's sex advice arouses opposition

BY JOSEPH MORTON

WORLD-HERALD BUREAUWASHINGTON -- A Web site offering detailed sex information to teenagers has some Midlands lawmakers turning red.

"It's enough to make an old person blush," said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb. "If that was in a printed magazine, it would be wrapped (in brown paper) and put behind a counter, and no teens would be allowed to buy it."

Planned Parenthood Federation of America started the site years ago as a way of providing medically accurate answers to the questions adolescents have about their changing bodies and sexual activity.

According to Planned Parenthood, adults can't afford to be naive -- many young people are going to have sex, and they need access to the most comprehensive information possible in order to protect themselves against sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

But some members of Congress now say the site goes too far, both in the graphic detail it provides and the messages it sends on topics such as premarital sex and abortion.

"It's borderline pornographic," said Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa. "It's far too descriptive, and it's unnecessary, and it's funded by federal taxpayer dollars funneled through Planned Parenthood."

The site is actually paid for by a private donation, according to Planned Parenthood. And the group says it keeps that private money separate from the federal funding it receives for health services such as cancer screenings, just as it keeps federal funding separate from its abortion services.

Planned Parenthood receives about one-third of its \$1 billion in total annual revenue from government grants and contracts.

King said what Planned Parenthood bills as "safer sex" on the Web site, he calls "promiscuity." He said the teen sex advice site was called to his attention earlier this year, and he hopes he can persuade his colleagues to cut off federal funding for the organization.

Discussion about the site comes in the midst of a larger debate on Capitol Hill about how, what and when young people should learn about sex. A hot button in that debate is the hundreds of millions of dollars the federal government has been spending in recent years for programs that promote abstinence.

Nebraska has been receiving about \$218,000 a year for such programs. That money is doled out as grants to communities that seek them.

Opponents of abstinence-based programs point to studies that say such programs tend to include inaccurate information and aren't all that effective. Many states have started turning down the money.

Earlier this year, Iowa Gov. Chet Culver decided to reject any future federal funding for abstinence education once its current funding expires this summer.

A Culver spokesman said the governor wanted to send a message to Washington that local communities in Iowa would not have their hands tied when it came to health programs. Iowa had been receiving \$318,000 a year.

Rep. Jim Moran, a Virginia Democrat, and 75 other lawmakers this month wrote a letter calling for the elimination of the Community-Based Abstinence Education program from the 2009 budget.

Terry has been a chief proponent of federal funding for abstinence programs, pushing to increase the amount of money going to them. He noted the rarity of such federally funded programs in the Omaha area, however, and said abstinence-based programs have never really been given a chance to succeed.

The oft-cited study that found inaccurate information in abstinence-based education involved an outdated program, Terry said.

The stakes in the debate are high.

A recent report by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that one in four teenage girls has a sexually transmitted disease, which can cause long-term health problems and lead to infertility and cervical cancer.

In Douglas County, STD rates for teens and adults are significantly above the national level. The CDC study was an analysis of nationally representative data on 838 girls who participated in a 2003-04 government health survey.

Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood, said that considering those statistics, the debate should revolve around what works to keep youngsters safe.

"The more you have an open conversation, whether it's a parent to their child or whether it's a

trusted teacher who can give good information, the more likely young people are to both delay being sexually active and, eventually, when they do become sexually active, the more likely they are to not do something risky," Richards said.

Anyone who remembers being in a giggling classroom of youngsters watching a video in health class can attest to what an uncomfortable subject sex can be. So it's not hard to imagine parents blushing at the material included on the Web site.

The site has articles such as "All About Arousal: The Science of Sex." The site also describes how teens can obtain birth control and gives advice to girls who are under 18 and may have trouble affording emergency contraception, or the "morning-after pill."

It has interactive features such as "Farmer Tina's Sexually Transmitted Infection Petting Zoo."

The site has advice for boys whose girlfriends become pregnant and decide to have abortions. It tells boys that they can be "compassionate partners" by offering to pay for as much of the procedure as they can and supporting the girl's decision, even if he disagrees with it.

A quiz about sexually transmitted infections details various forms of safer "sex play." The site also recommends safe sex options and answers questions submitted by users.

Said Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb.: "This site is wholly inappropriate as an 'educational' endeavor and looks like it belongs on late-night cable. If any federal funds are used for this exercise in poor taste, we are truly letting down the American taxpayer."

King accused Planned Parenthood of having financial interests at stake since it provides abortions and contraception.

"They cash in on promiscuity, on sexual activity, regardless of whether it's the contraception or whether it's the abortion," King said. "They've got a perverse motivation here to undermine the morality of our society."

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said he would like to see federal funding to Planned Parenthood cut.

"You have to question the motives of an organization that, in effect, promotes risky sexual behavior and also profits from the pain of abortion," Fortenberry said. "We should be focusing on helping young people to be confident and self-possessed, avoiding unhealthy situations."

Bobbie Kierstead, vice president of public affairs for Planned Parenthood of Nebraska & Council Bluffs, said those comments represent political attacks from longtime opponents of the organization. She said about 750,000 teenagers will get pregnant this year and 4 million will get an STD.

"It's more important than ever that teens have medically accurate, lifesaving health information, and politicians shouldn't try to deny it to them," she said.

The group encourages parents, particularly of younger children, to talk about what they should be viewing on the Web, she said.

When Richards, the national head of Planned Parenthood, learned that the Web site has been making congressmen such as Terry uncomfortable, she suggested that the Omaha lawmaker attend one of the organization's classes that teach parents how to talk about sex with their children.

Terry said he agrees that parents have a responsibility when it comes to providing sex education, but he objects to the group posting the material on a Web site. He added that he and his wife already have talked about how and when to go over the facts of life with their sons.

"We feel that we have a good grasp of that," Terry said.

