



March 5, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

RE: Eliminate Funding for Abstinence-Only Programs in FY10 Budget

Dear Mr. President:

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On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a non-partisan public interest organization dedicated to protecting the constitutional rights of individuals, and its hundreds of thousands of members, activists, and 53 affiliates nationwide, we urge you to end, once and for all, the misguided efforts of the past decade to politicize and censor young people's access to basic, medically accurate and age-appropriate information that could protect their health. In that vein, we ask that you eliminate funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in your fiscal year 2010 budget recommendation expected in April 2009.

Your election heralded a new way of governing and a renewed hope that government will support effective, science-based, non-ideological policies that serve the public interest. However, although your fiscal year 2010 budget outline, released on February 26, 2009, laudably prioritizes the prevention of teenage pregnancy, it does not state unambiguously that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs will have no place in your Administration. We hope you will remedy this ambiguity.

Since 1996, Congress has appropriated more than one billion dollars for programs that focus exclusively on abstinence and censor other information that can help young people make responsible, healthy, and safe decisions about relationships and sexual activity. Under President Bush, funding for these programs expanded significantly. These increases occurred despite scientific evidence that cast very serious doubts about the effectiveness of these programs. Indeed, a long list of scientists, public health organizations, and public interest organizations have asked that funding for abstinence-only programs cease.

Even a congressionally-mandated study, released in April 2007 by Mathematica Policy Research Inc., on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services, concluded that abstinence-only programs don't work. This study evaluated several federally funded programs and found that teens who participated in them were just as likely to be sexually active as those

who did not.

The evidence points to one conclusion: abstinence-only programs represent a failed and ideologically-based policy. They are not premised on science or good public health policy nor do they serve the best interests of teenagers. Moreover, they are constitutionally suspect. We ought not support programs that censor information, reinforce gender stereotypes, marginalize gay and lesbian youth, provide inaccurate and misleading information, promote religion, and jeopardize the well-being of young people.

At least two of your Cabinet nominees seem to share this conclusion. Both Secretary Janet Napolitano, the former Governor of Arizona, and Governor Kathleen Sebelius, your nominee for Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, rejected federal abstinence-only funding as leaders of their respective state governments. The governors of almost half of the states have also rejected abstinence-only federal funding.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs represent a purposeful campaign to mislead, distort, stifle and censor. They encourage a disturbing trend to politicize science and they express a disdain for knowledge and the free exchange of ideas that stands at the heart of our democracy and historical traditions. These programs are premised on the belief that providing teenagers with information will, in all cases, lead to bad and immoral decision-making rather than informed and thoughtful decision-making that can avert sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and unintended pregnancies. Our nation's young people deserve better from their government.

The elimination of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs is wholly consistent with statements you made throughout your campaign and even in the early weeks of your presidency. You stated that spending unable to withstand public scrutiny would not be justified and you would scour the budget, line by line, to be rid of programs that do not work. You promised to restore the basic principle that government decisions should be based on the best available, scientifically valid evidence and not on the ideological predispositions of agency officials or political appointees. You expressed concern that scientific integrity was being undermined and asserted that the promotion of science included protecting free and open inquiry and ensuring that facts and evidence were never twisted or obscured by politics. You stated that your administration would enact an extensive program of prevention, including access to comprehensive age-appropriate sex education for all school age children. These commitments simply cannot co-exist with continued funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

We urge you not to be distracted by those who concoct divisions where none exist. Those of us who seek the elimination of federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs do not oppose teaching teenagers about the benefits of waiting. Let us be clear: where local communities choose to offer teenagers instruction and guidance about human sexuality, information that will help them delay the onset of sexual activity should be an important component of that educational program. Moreover, parents, caregivers, and spiritual leaders all have appropriate roles to play in the lives of teenagers. But the federal government has an obligation to provide young people with accurate, age-appropriate

information that can preserve their health and future aspirations. This can be achieved by supporting effective comprehensive sexuality education programs.

We urge you to give primacy to programs that serve the real needs of teenagers and their families. In these grave fiscal times, when scarce federal resources are required to meet significant challenges, hard-earned taxpayer dollars should not go to programs, like abstinence-only-until-marriage, that raise civil liberties concerns and only serve a narrow political and ideological agenda. We urge you to zero fund abstinence-only programs in your FY10 budget.

Sincerely,



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Vania Leveille
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cc: Melody Barnes, Director, White House Domestic Policy Council
Peter Orszag, Director, Office of Management and Budget
Speaker Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader John Boehner
Majority Leader Harry Reid
Minority Leader Mitch McConnell
Chairman Daniel Inouye
Ranking Member Thad Cochran
Chairman Tom Harkin
Ranking Member Arlen Specter
Chairman David Obey
Ranking Member Jerry Lewis
Ranking Member Todd Tiahrt