



'Abstinence-only' programs fail to confront reality

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To the editor:

As a long-time provider of federal- and state-funded low-cost, confidential reproductive health care in the Gloucester, Lawrence, and Haverhill areas, we at Health Quarters take issue with many of the assertions in Taylor Armerding's op-ed piece ("Abstinence has a place in teen sex debate," June 1, 2008) about providing birth control at the Gloucester High School health center.

While we agree that the promotion of sexual abstinence is our primary message, it still should be one element of a comprehensive sexuality education program, which may include birth control prescription. According to a 2005 study, abstinence-only until marriage programs can fail to prepare young people for the time they, almost inevitably, will become sexually active. Most adolescents studied who pledged to remain virgins until marriage broke their vows, and they were less likely to use condoms and seek testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) than non-pledge takers.

We would like to respond to the following:

1. Armerding mentions the antiquated state law prohibiting students under age 16 from having sex. Do we really want school nurses and youth-based providers to become law enforcement officials, turning in senior boys who are dating junior girls? Without trust, communication — so vital between adult caregivers and teens — will be lost.
2. He states that condoms "might not prevent a sexually transmitted disease," and "might prevent a pregnancy." This phraseology undermines the proven value of condoms, which can be 98 percent effective in preventing pregnancy and close to 100-percent effective in protecting against HIV infection. No birth control method is perfect, but let's not negate the "pro-condom" message teens have been shown to "get" after years of reinforcement in wellness classes.
3. Armerding refers to emotional and psychological damage that casual intimacy may cause teens. He may be referencing some now widely debunked studies, which make the argument that such teens will never be able to bond with a partner or have loving attachments later in life. At Health Quarters, we do not promote sexual activity among

teens, but we base our messages on honest concerns about health and values, not misinformation meant to scare young people.

4. He "thanks" sex ed for the rise in oral sex among teens. To the contrary, it seems that abstinence programs, which take credit for young people delaying intercourse, have led teens to substitute other behaviors, especially oral sex. The new data tend to support this view, showing that nearly one in four virgin teens has engaged in oral sex.

For more than 36 years, Health Quarters has worked to engage community leaders, health professionals, school administrators, youth-serving providers and, most importantly, parents as partners in our efforts to keep teens safe and healthy. The best solution to unwanted pregnancy will be the result of realistic and open-minded conversation and collaboration among those of us who care deeply about the welfare of our young people.

Lianne Cook

Executive Director

Health Quarters

Beverly

Money on police department was not misspent

To the editor:

In response to Earl Merrow's letter (June 5) criticizing money spent for the Salem, N.H. Police Department, it's called morale. It may not be tangible, like a new sub floor or carpet, but I suggest it is more important to the foundation of a police department than the building itself. Mr. Merrow's suggestion that the money to change the Salem Police uniforms to blue (yes, dark blue not black, but don't let the facts get in the way of your argument) and paint the cruisers black and white (both of which are in line with the color schemes of more than 90 percent of police departments nationwide — again, fact) was misspent is myopic.

Unlike the previous leadership in the department, Chief Donovan was and still is a cop. He realizes that not only do the new uniforms help distinguish the officers from local security officers (ever see the uniforms at Canobie and Rockingham Park?) but they build the spirit of the department. A good leader makes the morale of the troops a high priority.

Shame on the town for voting down a much-needed police station, but that's not the chief's fault. That money was given to the police department by the courts to benefit the officers who risked their lives taking drug dealers off the street.

Do visitors to the nicely kept library throw feces at the wall or punch employees while getting bailed out? A little education before you speak, that's all that is necessary.

We are all ignorant of many things in life. What sets some of us apart from others is that we don't wear our ignorance like a red badge of courage in the editorial pages.

Perhaps the department should still carry revolvers in order to afford some new carpet?

Wesley Decker

Salem N.H.

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