

My view: New federal regulations would restrict access to reproductive health services

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With just a handful of months left in office, the Bush Administration has delivered an extravagant going-away present to its conservative supporters. It is one whose cost will be borne yet again by predominantly low-income women seeking the health care they deserve.

New proposed regulations from the U.S. Office of Health and Human Services endeavor to change the medically accepted definition of abortion to include many forms of birth control, and will drastically expand the freedom of individuals and institutions to refuse to offer such reproductive health services.

For the past eight years, President Bush has given the lie to his stated goal of preventing unwanted pregnancy and abortion by supporting funding for ineffective, abstinence-only-until marriage-based sex education over comprehensive health education; by appointing known anti-contraception doctors to head the government's family planning program; and by encouraging the rise of anti-choice "pregnancy crisis centers." These draft regulations are another tactic, bringing with them the potential of forcing hundreds of thousands of health-care organizations and individual practitioners who receive federal funding of any kind, including Medicaid, to comply, effectively allowing widespread refusal of birth control to women who need it.

Currently, three federal laws give individuals and institutions that receive federal funding the ability to refuse to provide abortion or sterilization services if those procedures are contrary to their religious or moral beliefs. The Bush administration has reinterpreted and vastly expanded these existing laws by changing the definition of pregnancy from implantation of a fertilized egg in a woman's uterus (the accepted medical — and the government's own — definition) to conception, the act of fertilization of the egg.

Under this new, unfounded definition, many birth-control methods, including oral contraceptives, some intrauterine devices (IUDs), the contraceptive ring, and emergency contraception (Plan B), would now be categorized as abortion and legally denied women.

In addition, now anyone with the most tangential relationship to these services, such as a receptionist at Health Quarters, can refuse to perform work duties due to moral objections.

Also quite troubling is the potential undermining of laws that require emergency rooms to offer rape survivors Plan B to prevent pregnancy. Under the draft rule, hospital staff could refuse to offer it and the hospital itself could be exempted from even having to tell rape survivors that such medication exists.

The impact of these regulations on Health Quarters and more than 70 other Title X-funded family planning sites statewide, could be dramatic. If they are implemented, women may no longer be able to rely on getting full information and common contraceptive methods from us.

We could either be forced to hire employees who will refuse to do their job or risk losing funding because of perceived discriminatory hiring practices. We may also have to compete for scarce family-planning dollars with entities, such as pregnancy crisis centers, that refuse to provide women with full access to information and services. Health Quarters' practice would be further affected as pharmacists refuse to fill contraception prescriptions and insurance plans drop existing equity coverage for contraceptives.

In the name of protecting religious freedom and personal choice, these regulations will trample a woman's legal and moral right to essential health-care services. The act of honoring the beliefs of some health care providers will result, hypocritically, in forcing those same beliefs on women who do not share them through the denial of services.

We must ensure that this proposal, which threatens to disrupt Health Quarters and the nation's network of safety net providers for low-income women and families, is immediately thwarted.

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Lianne Cook is in her 19th year as executive director of Health Quarters, which has reproductive health centers in Beverly, Haverhill, Lawrence and Reading.

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