

Worry-Free Sex

Funding extended for Oregon's Family Planning Expansion Project.

For thousands of UO students, there is one incomparably good reason to brave the student Health Center even on its busiest days — free birth control.

The UO Health Center is one of more than 120 statewide providers that offers free birth control and family planning resources to women and men who otherwise couldn't afford it, thanks to Oregon's Family Planning Expansion Project (FPEP), which reimburses the providers for these services.

Despite its importance, funding for FPEP, a five-year "demonstration project," was originally slated to end this December. But last month, the federal government renewed FPEP through October 2006. Even an administration that's presently waging war against family planning programs cannot dispute FPEP's benefits: The savings are substantial, the social impacts far-reaching.

At sites where FPEP is offered, the UO Health Center, LCC, Planned Parenthood or the Public Health Department, clients go through the same process: After scheduling an appointment, they merely fill out an eligibility form, go through a height/weight/blood pressure check, and have an informative conversation with a typically pleasant nurse practitioner.

Eligibility requirements include being a U.S. citizen and for Oregon residents, having an income within 185 percent of the federal poverty level (a single person with an annual income less than \$16,613 or a family of four with less than \$34,040).

As long as they meet eligibility requirements, clients receive the kind of birth control they prefer, such as pills, diaphragms and condoms (including expensive methods like Depo-Provera) at no cost. In most cases, they can walk out with a supply of contraceptives that day.

On-the-spot allocation of contraception is a cornerstone of FPEP. Jeanne Atkins, FPEP program manager, emphasizes the importance of not making clients apply for contraceptives only to make them wait several weeks to receive them. "Because," she says, "people don't necessarily wait until they can get birth control to have sex."

In addition to birth control and family planning resources, eligible women receive free annual exams and pregnancy tests through FPEP and eligible men may also receive family planning counseling and services.



'It is no small accomplishment that Oregon received this renewal.'

— Marilyn Helton, Planned Parenthood

Because FPEP is a program specifically geared toward preventing unintended pregnancies, resources are allotted on the premise that clients want to avoid this particular situation (safer sex, though, is an added benefit).

THE VISION

The vision for FPEP was born seven years ago when the Oregon Legislature joined forces with several public health departments and family planning programs to reduce the high rates of teen pregnancies in the state. The visionaries knew the cost of providing free birth control would be less than the short-term and long-term costs of Medicaid-funded births.

The people involved — then-Gov. John Kitzhaber, Bill Sheppard, CEO of the regional Planned Parenthood, and Atkins — began drafting the proposal to the federal Medicaid office. FPEP was proposed as a waiver project similar to the Oregon Health Plan. Like the OHP, it would reach economically disadvantaged people who may not qualify for Medicaid. The goals cited in the proposal were to decrease unintended pregnancies among teenagers and women of all ages, to expand family planning services, and to save significant dollars.

"It was an exciting opportunity," says Atkins. "But meeting all of the requirements of the federal Medicaid office for this kind of waiver was a bureaucratic challenge."

So challenging, in fact, that it took almost

two years to write. The work put into the complicated and lengthy waiver application would ultimately pay off though. In late 1998, the approval from the federal Medicaid office came through.

"We were celebrating in the clinic hallways the minute approval from the feds was received in the fall of 1998," says Marilyn Helton, patient services co-director of Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Oregon.

Since that time, Helton says, "We have seen nearly 400 percent growth since FPEP began in early 1999. We have built new clinics in the Bethel/Danebo neighborhood and on Q Street in Springfield, purchased larger buildings, expanded hours of operation, and hired many additional staff."

Family planning clinics and health centers across the state cite similar expansion of their services and programs. Thus the "expansion" in Family Planning Expansion Project.

MILLIONS IN SAVINGS

More than 10,000 unintended pregnancies among Medicaid subscribers were averted during FPEP's first two years alone. (This was measured by comparing the number of *actual* unplanned pregnancies to the number of *expected* unplanned pregnancies.) With the typical cost of a Medicaid birth estimated at \$4,875, that's an estimated gross of \$64.9 million in savings.

Over the past five years, thousands of women and men have come to rely on FPEP's services to help prevent unplanned pregnancies. Arwen Ungar, a UO senior, has used FPEP through Eugene's Planned Parenthood since she was 16. Ungar received free birth control based on her own income, not that of her parents. Through the inherent privacy FPEP offers, Ungar was given the freedom to make decisions on her own.

Understanding the needs of clients is of utmost importance to FPEP staff. They know that many people have been misinformed or have had bad experiences with birth control in the past and that many welfare recipients have been treated with judgment and condescension in the past.

"The ultimate goal is to make sure that every FPEP-qualified person receives the information and care that they deserve," says Leslie Uebel, FPEP social marketing coordinator.

In constantly soliciting feedback through surveys and focus groups, FPEP employees like Uebel have tailored the program to fulfill clients' requests. Some changes seen over the past five years include shortening waiting times at clinics; providing educational materials directed toward male partners, especially in the Latino communities; and providing additional cultural competency training to service providers.

Renewal of FPEP through October 2006 is cause for celebration for employees, providers and clients alike. "In the face of such a conservative administration and political climate, it is no small accomplishment that Oregon received this renewal," says Helton.

Until now, many providers were waiting in the wings, unsure if they would be able to continue offering services beyond December. The UO Health Center was urging clients to take care of their birth control needs by the end of the year. Now they can rest easy — at least for another three years.

LOOKING FOR PERMANENCE

FPEP employees and providers intend to continue their quest to constantly improve the program. At a statewide level, the primary focus will be on reaching out to clients who may not have had access up to this point. (Though, unfortunately because of citizenship requirements, this does exclude some populations that could greatly benefit from FPEP.) At the provider level, programs like Planned Parenthood and the UO Health Center are looking for more ways to expand their services.

The greater hope is that FPEP may some day obtain permanent status. Clinics throughout the state are keenly aware of Marilyn Helton's observation — that until such a program becomes permanent and no longer deemed a "demonstration project," it could disappear.

After all, as long as people continue to be sexually active, the need for this program will exist. Says Jeanne Atkins, "We are just beginning to see the impact on unintended pregnancies that such an effort [as FPEP] can produce."

For more information about FPEP (including county programs), visit www.dhs.state.or.us/publichealth/fp/about.cfm **EW**

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