

THE TITLE X FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAM



The American Association of University Women has long supported access to comprehensive family planning and reproductive health services for all women. In 1935, AAUW's legislative program called for "legalizing the dispensing of information by physicians on contraception." In 1977, AAUW legislative positions included support for the "right of individual choice in the determination of one's reproductive life." This position has since been affirmed biennially at AAUW conventions by large majorities of delegates.

AAUW believes that decisions concerning reproductive health care are personal and individual. All women should have the right to make informed decisions, including poor women who cannot pay for their own health care. Because access to family planning is responsible public policy, AAUW supports Title X of the Public Health Service Act. Enacted by Congress in 1970, Title X is the nation's principal family planning program. Title X has not been reauthorized since 1985 but has been funded through a continuing resolution which funds established programs that have not been reauthorized by Congress. Since 1985, however, funding has been steadily cut. AAUW will work with other family planning advocates to reauthorize Title X and secure its funding and existence.

Through Title X, the federal government makes grants to public and private nonprofit organizations that provide basic reproductive health care, contraceptive services, fertility and pregnancy testing, and non-directive counseling and referral. These services are to be available to all, with priority given to low-income persons. Over five million women receive reproductive health care from the 4300 clinics funded through Title X. Eighty percent of the women served at these sites have incomes below the poverty level. In addition, Title X provides for reproductive, behavioral, demographic and contraceptive research, training of clinic personnel and community education projects through the National Institutes of Health. Since its inception in 1970, Title X has enjoyed strong bipartisan support in both houses of Congress as humane and pragmatic public policy.

The Title X charter specifically prohibits the use of federal funds for abortion services. In the fall of 1987, the Reagan Administration issued new regulations for the administration of Title X that would radically change its history and intent by prohibiting any mention of abortion in counseling and referral options; clinic personnel would be required to provide women with a list of pre-approved prenatal and adoption services. In addition, family planning clinics that also provide abortion services with private funds would have to have completely separate abortion facilities, personnel, and administration, or lose their federal funding. In October the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of *Rust v. Sullivan*, in which advocates of family planning asked the court to overturn the federal regulations that prohibit the mention of abortion in Title X-funded facilities. The 1988 regulations state that such clinics cannot mention abortion as part of their counseling -- even if the woman requests such information or specifically states that she wants to terminate her pregnancy. AAUW signed on as an amicus to this case.

On May 23, 1991, in a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court handed down a devastating opinion upholding the regulations, thus denying poor and low-income women their right to receive full information. The Court ruling also ignores the ethical relationship between doctor and patient and denies the first amendment rights of clients who use the clinics. In addition, the Court ruled that to receive Title X funds, these clinics may not have on-site facilities to perform abortions. The Court, in effect, is allowing the Administration to use Title X funds to promote its anti-choice and anti-family-planning agenda. AAUW and other family planning advocates are working with Congress to overturn this ruling.

AAUW advocates safe, confidential, comprehensive reproductive health care, and strongly objects to attacks on the Title X program. The decision to uphold the "gag rule" flies in the face of freedom of speech by withholding information on all the reproductive options available to women under the law. Millions of American women depend on the Title X-funded clinic as their single source of health care. If clinics are forced to reject Title X funding because of federal ideological impositions, low-income women will be denied access to basic health care. AAUW believes that one purpose of family planning is to reduce the need for and number of abortions. Adequate and essential medical information must be available to all people, not just to those who can afford private physicians.

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