

## Bryant calls for strategy to curb teen pregnancies

Gov. Phil Bryant is giving newly appointed Department of Human Services executive director Rickey Berry 30 days to come up with a plan to reduce teen pregnancy in Mississippi.

Bryant is expected to make the announcement in today's State of the State address.

Spokesman Mick Bullock said, while "state agencies must do what they can to combat the teenage pregnancy epidemic, the governor also believes the entire community - including individuals, doctors, schools, businesses and churches - is responsible for identifying teen pregnancy as an activity more dangerous than smoking."

Mississippi leads the nation in per capita teen births, with more than 83 percent of teen pregnancies unintended. A third of all Mississippi births are to teen mothers.

A study shows teen pregnancies cost taxpayers more than \$154 million a year. The Mississippi Economic Policy Center calculated lost wages, reduced wages and lost taxes as well as other costs, such as foster care, incarceration and public assistance in figuring annual costs.

Bryant hammered the point home in his inauguration address, calling for a repudiation of teen births as there has been for smoking.

Julia Bryan, public information officer for Human Services, said Berry is already "working to pull together members from the community, faith-based and governmental agencies to evaluate what can be done to effectively reduce these numbers."

Each year, the DHS receives \$824,000 in Title V funding aimed at promoting abstinence among teenagers.

This past year, the department passed on its \$824,000 grant to the state Department of Education. By June, public schools are required to have an abstinence-only or abstinence-plus program in place.

Jamie Holcomb, director of programs for the Women's Fund of Mississippi, said Bryant is correct that parents play a strong

Advertisement

role in this, "but we also have a role in recognizing reality."

Scientific evidence shows abstinence-plus works but abstinence-only doesn't, she said. "It doesn't make sense for state agencies to put money where it doesn't work."

A state Department of Health survey released last month showed three-fourths of all 12th-graders in Mississippi have had sex.

Abstinence-only ignores those three-fourths, Holcomb said, failing to give "young people more information and increasing the possibility of them being responsible."

State Health Officer Dr. Mary Currier said the Personal Responsibility Education Program has been shown to reduce teen pregnancy among students.

"They don't just talk about sex," she said. "They teach personal responsibility. They teach the avoidance of situations where kids could get into sex before they should."

A recent study by the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University showed 92 percent of Mississippi parents say they want age-appropriate sex education taught in schools, she said. "These curricula teach students decision-making skills, including how to say no."

Bullock said the governor also will work to pass the Child Protection Act, which

requires teachers, counselors, doctors, preachers, police officers and film processors to report suspected sexual abuse within 48 hours to authorities.

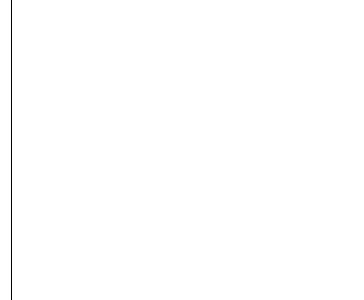
The bill also would require any physician who performs an abortion on a minor under 14 years old to preserve fetal tissue in accordance with rules and regulations adopted by the State Board of Health. The physician would submit the tissue to the Mississippi Department of Public Safety.

Bill supporters say the tissue would be used for DNA purposes to determine paternity and to prosecute perpetrators of sexual abuse or statutory rape.

A physician's failure to comply would be a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$5,000 fine. A second offense would be a felony that carries up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

"Similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate each year but has failed to pass in the House," Bullock said.

Advertisement



In addition, he said, "adult males who impregnate teenage girls will be prosecuted as sexual predators, and all noncustodial biological parents must pay child support."

Under state law, sexual battery takes place when the child is under 14 and engages in sex (except in cases where the person engaging in sexual penetration is less than 24 months older), where the child is between 14 and 16 (except when the person is less than 36 months older) and where the child is less than 18 (and the person is an adult in trust or authority over the child).

Upon conviction, the minimum sentence for adults 21 or older would be 20 years. For those between 18 and 21, the minimum sentence would be five years.

#### **AT A GLANCE**

Gov. Phil Bryant will give his first State of the State address at 5:30 p.m. today on the south steps of the Capitol.

Advertisement