



washington view

by Erin Raftery, Government Relations Fellow

It is a tumultuous time in our nation's capitol for the advancement of reproductive health and sex education issues. As this issue goes to press, George Bush continues to withhold critical funds for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the House Energy and Commerce Committee has passed a harmful "abstinence-only-unless-married" sexuality education program. With world population rapidly approaching 6.5 billion people, education and access to family planning is necessary now, more than ever! Our friends in Congress, and family planning supporters, are working hard to convince the Bush Administration to release the funds for UNFPA and they are pushing for comprehensive sexuality education programs.

▼ UNFPA

The United Nations Population Fund is the leading international source of funding for family planning programs in developing countries. That's why many people, including those in Congress, are wondering why the White House is still holding back the \$34 million allocated for UNFPA. President Bush himself originally requested \$25 million for the program, and signed the bill allocating \$34 million, which received bipartisan support by Congress. Now these funds are at a standstill. President Bush is withholding all funding at the request of a group of anti-choice conservatives in Congress who insist, against all evidence to the contrary, that UNFPA supports forced abortions in China. These ideological accusations made by family planning opponents have turned a clear issue of international importance into a pro-life domestic debate. U.N. officials estimate that the loss of U.S. funding could undermine their ability to prevent 4,700 maternal deaths, 77,000 infant and child deaths, and 800,000 abortions worldwide.

However, there is still a chance for these funds to be reinstated. On March 21, the President submitted a \$27.1 billion Emergency FY 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Request to

Congress, asking for additional funding for the war on terrorism, homeland security and economic recovery. This supplemental bill could serve as a vehicle for the family planning supporters in Congress to propose an amendment to restore funds for UNFPA and end this dilemma.

In addition, Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) teamed up with Reps. Jim Greenwood (R-PA), Joseph Crowley (D-NY), Mark Kirk (R-IL), Nita Lowey (D-NY), Doug Ose (R-CA) and John Dingell (D-MI) to introduce the "Saving Women's Lives Act" (H.R. 3916). The bill would insure that UNFPA would receive the \$34 million in aid already appropriated for the agency for FY 2002. It would also provide \$50 million in aid to the agency for the next fiscal year, 2003.

▼ "Abstinence-only" Education Programs

The House Energy and Commerce Committee voted 35-17 to continue funding for the harmful "abstinence-only" education program for the next five years. "Abstinence-only" programs are prohibited from discussing the benefits of birth control and must teach that sex outside of marriage has harmful "psychological" consequences. Passage of the bill came despite the fact that some committee members admitted that no study has ever found an "abstinence-only" program effective in reducing or delaying adolescent sexual activity.

During the debate, committee members rejected three amendments designed to improve the restrictive "abstinence-only" education program. Demonstrating a highly ideological bias, and an apparent lack of concern for sound public health policy, members rejected amendments that would have required that information presented in "abstinence-only" programs be medically accurate, and that programs receiving funding have been proven effective. There will be future opportunities to try and amend this program. The measure still has to be approved by the full House and sent to the Senate for approval.