

STATEMENT

of

REVEREND EDWARD M. BRYCE

on behalf of the

COMMITTEE FOR PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES

of the

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

of the

COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES

U.S. SENATE

ADOLESCENT FAMILY LIFE PROGRAM

S. 2616

May 10, 1984

I appreciate this opportunity to comment on behalf of the Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities regarding S. 2616, a bill re-authorizing the Adolescent Family Life program. This program was first enacted in 1981 as Title XX of the Public Health Service Act, with support from a wide variety of pro-life groups as well as from many organizations providing services to pregnant teenagers and their families. As a means for supporting and studying effective ways to provide "alternatives to abortion" to the young women most in need of such alternatives, the Adolescent Family Life program warrants support from Americans who may have widely differing views on the legal status of abortion itself.

Several features of the existing program mark a significant improvement over previous adolescent pregnancy programs, and should be retained without weakening amendments as this re-authorization bill moves through the legislative process.

(1) Most important are the restrictions on the performance or promotion of abortion by grantees. These restrictions make it clear that this program is intended to offer life-affirming services for both mother and child, not to assist in the destruction of the child. They make possible the participation of many agencies committed to helping women with "problem pregnancies" which have struggled to offer alternatives to abortion without public funding since the Supreme Court's decisions of 1973. Many of these agencies would find it impossible to participate in a program that required them to facilitate abortion in any way.

(2) Also important is the program's emphasis on adoption services. One of the most tragic statistics on teen pregnancy is that only about half of all unwed pregnant adolescents carry their children to term, and less than 10 percent of these place their children with adoptive parents. Current social attitudes seem to encourage these teenagers to feel they must raise their children themselves or, if this seems impossible, to eliminate the problem through abortion. Placing a child for adoption should, of course, only be considered for serious reasons, and careful reflection as well as supportive counseling are necessary for a young woman to decide whether it is the best option for herself and her child. The AFL program's support for adoption services facilitates this decision-making process, thereby serving not only mother and child but also the approximately two million infertile couples in the United States who long to give a loving home to an adopted child.

(3) Another positive innovation in the current program is the support given to "services to prevent adolescent sexual relations." This provision has prompted some of our less thoughtful pundits to ridicule the AFL program as the "adolescent chastity bill." Ridicule should instead be directed at the assumption that condoning adolescent sexual activity will improve the situation. To the extent that family planning advocates have led teenagers to believe that premarital sexual activity will be without adverse consequences so long as they use contraceptives, they have failed to address numerous social aspects of the situation, including the high incidence of sexually transmitted

disease as well as the moral and psychological effects of adolescent sexual experimentation. Surely the time is ripe to investigate other ways of addressing this problem--ways which will appeal to and strengthen teenagers' maturity and self-discipline.

(4) The Adolescent Family Life program also attempts to maximize family involvement in its programs for dependent minors. Programs dealing with such sensitive areas as adolescent sexuality and parenthood should assist and support parents in fulfilling their responsibilities, instead of attempting to supplant them or to work behind their backs. This program's carefully drawn provisions for parental notification and consent provide an essential safeguard for parental rights against ill-considered government-sponsored erosion of family relationships. With regard to services such as family planning and medical care, such provisions are justified on public health grounds alone, for parents are personally, legally and financially responsible for their children's health and are generally more knowledgeable than anyone else concerning their medical history.

(5) Generally speaking, the Adolescent Family Life program offers a balanced and comprehensive approach to the problem of unwed teen pregnancy. It is increasingly clear that adolescent pregnancy is a symptom of complex social, economic, psychological and moral problems that will not be solved by a narrow technological approach. The present administration of the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs seems to recognize this and to

emphasize a more thoughtful approach.

These features of the Adolescent Family Life program, which are retained in the re-authorization proposed by S. 2616, are worthy of support. There are other features to which I cannot lend my support. For example, the sections on the provision of artificial contraceptives and on referral to abortion counseling under certain circumstances permit activity which does not conform to the Catholic Church's moral teaching. Still, such activity is not required of grantees, and the program itself is designed to provide necessary social, medical, educational and vocational services to pregnant teenagers, not to promote either abortion counseling or contraception. The provisions which I have praised regarding abortion, family involvement, and so on reflect a respectful attitude toward human life and sexuality which is shared by many Americans regardless of religious affiliation.

Notwithstanding the reservation expressed above regarding this program, I commend Senator Denton and the other co-sponsors of S. 2616 for its many positive features. These are features which, minimally, must be retained as re-authorization and increased funding of the program are considered.