

EXPERTS BRIEF CONGRESS ON VIOLENCE & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

“The intersection of sexual violence and reproductive health has been largely unexplored, but it’s time for that to change,” Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF) Public Policy Director Kiersten Stewart said in March, moderating a congressional briefing on the subject. Violence prevention and health experts told congressional staff and advocates that violence against women is associated with negative reproductive health outcomes including more sexually transmitted infections (STIs), higher rates of unintended pregnancy, limited use of prenatal care, and poor birth outcomes. Experts recommended integrating violence prevention into reproductive health education, and funding the health programs in the *Violence against Women Act (VAWA)*.

Jay Silverman, Ph.D. of the Harvard School of Public Health, has conducted research which found that one in three teenage girls abused by a boyfriend becomes pregnant, and one in three teens tested for STIs and HIV/AIDS have experienced domestic violence. “We were shocked when we saw birth control sabotage in our research, but we saw it over and over again,” he said. “The normality of coerced and forced sex is alarming.”

Along with Dr. Silverman, the briefing featured: Andrea Kane, National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy; Tricia Bent-Goodley, Ph.D., LICSW, Howard University School of Social Work; and Bonnie J. Dattel, M.D., American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. It was co-sponsored by Representatives Lois Capps (D-CA), Michael Castle (R-DE) and Joseph Crowley (D-NY).

“At a time when teen births are on the rise and unplanned pregnancy among young adults is stalled at a high level, it is more important than ever to focus on critical connections between these issues and

domestic and sexual violence," Kane said. "There is a need for innovative approaches to help teens and young adults have healthier and more respectful relationships, to equip parents to talk to their sons and daughters about the importance of such relationships, and to ensure that women get effective methods of contraception to prevent pregnancy if they are in an unhealthy or violent relationship."

"The rise in rates of HIV/AIDS and domestic and sexual violence are connected," Dr. Bent-Goodley agreed. "Even today, there is still a stigma associated with HIV/AIDS transmission or experiencing domestic or sexual violence, and some women will not seek treatment."

"Studies show that incidences of abuse actually increase during pregnancy, and a woman's ob-gyn is often the only person she'll confide in," Dr. Dattel added. "Two very important parts of VAWA that will directly help ob-gyns and other physicians care for abuse victims are: the Training of Health Professionals Program; and the Public Health Responses Program. We encourage Congress to fund them."

In September, the FVPF launched the ***KnowMoreSayMore*** initiative to start a dialogue about how sexual and domestic violence affect reproductive health and the high rates of reproductive coercion that many teens and young women face. It examines the reproductive health consequences of sexual coercion and violence, which include unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, miscarriage, infertility, coerced abortion, and a range of other serious health issues. Its website, at www.KnowMoreSayMore.org, features stories from women who have experienced violence and coercion.