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MEMORANDUM OF SUPPORT

Healthy Teens Act A.1806 (Gottfried, et al) 2009

AN ACT to amend the public health law and the state finance law, in relation to establishing the age-appropriate sex education grant program, to be referred to as the Healthy Teens Act.

Young people are bombarded by a sexually explicit culture through television, movies, magazines and the Internet. Fortunately, we know that when given accurate information and the opportunity to build appropriate skills, young people are capable of making informed decisions about their health and sexual activity.

Sex and HIV education programs that discuss not only abstinence, but include relationship skills, self-esteem building and information about condoms and other methods of contraception have been proven to:

- delay the onset of intercourse
- reduce the frequency of intercourse
- decrease the number of sexual partners of program participants
- increase condom use or contraceptive use

This is particularly important considering 60% of New York State adolescents engage in sexual activity before they graduate from high school and rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) continue to be distressingly high.

- In New York State there were more than 40,000 teenage pregnancies among 15-19 year-olds in 2006 (New York State Department of Health)
- Nationally, 1 in 4 teenage girls has a sexually transmitted infection (Centers for Disease Control)
- Half of all new HIV infections are among young people under the age of 25 (Centers for Disease Control)

Young people have a right to information that can protect their health and save their lives. Unfortunately, New York State has no dedicated funding stream for comprehensive sex education in schools, and not all schools and teachers are able to provide this lifesaving information due to the lack of resources. Young people should not be subject to luck when it comes to whether their school or teacher will provide important, lifesaving information. The

Healthy Teens Act would establish a competitive grant program open to local school districts, school-based health centers, BOCES and community-based organizations for the implementation of comprehensive, age-appropriate sex education. In order to be considered for funding, programs must:

- include a strong parental involvement component
- encourage family communication
- provide medically accurate information
- stress the value of abstinence and provide information about STI and pregnancy prevention
- help young people develop the skills they need to make responsible decisions about their sexual health and reproductive lives

This legislation, to be implemented by the Department of Health, would ensure that educational programs allow for honest interaction between teachers and students and fund the use of the most effective teaching methods for preventing unintended pregnancy and STIs. The Healthy Teens Act would create a funding source for schools and communities to provide age-appropriate programs so that young people can learn how to protect themselves, build self-esteem, learn negotiation and refusal skills and become better equipped to face an increasingly sexualized world propelled by mass media.

New Yorkers overwhelmingly support sex education in schools. 88 percent of New Yorkers agree that all students should have information about contraception and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, when given a description of the Healthy Teens Act, 72 percent of New Yorkers favor the legislation. Finally, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation report (2003), young people have serious misperceptions about STIs, HIV/AIDS and “safer sex” and express a need for information about sexual health.

This legislation is not a mandate, but allows school districts to work with community-based organizations to address these concerns in a school setting. It will provide appropriate funding to programs that provide accurate health information to young people in order to help them make healthy choices.

For the above reasons, Family Planning Advocates urges passage of the Healthy Teens Act.