

Wasting Resources and Risking Lives

Philanthropy, Bush and Abstinence-Only Programs

By Jeff Krehely

What value does society—including taxpayers, the government, and (especially) the country's most disadvantaged citizens—get in return for the huge amounts of public money given directly and indirectly to nonprofits and foundations?

A recent report from Texas A&M University confirmed—yet again—that abstinence-only sex education programs do not necessarily deter teenagers from having sex. This study found that 23 percent of ninth-grade girls and 24 percent of 10th-grade boys had sex before participating in abstinence-only education programs. After the programs, 29 percent of the girls and 39 percent of the boys in the same groups reported having sex.

Findings from other reports, including one published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, suggest that abstinence-only programs are not only ineffective, but that they also increase the likelihood that a teen will have unprotected sex once they become sexually active. Abstinence-only education programs do not provide any information on using condoms or other safe-sex practices—in fact, to qualify for federal grants to run such programs, organizations are barred from preaching anything besides abstinence as a way to prevent sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancies. Thus, teens participating in such programs will be less likely to know about safe-sex options, compared with teens participating in programs that weren't forbidden from using the word "condom."

Texas A&M's Scott and White Memorial Hospital received nearly \$800,000 in 2004 from the Bush administration to run an abstinence-only program called *Worth the Wait*. This money was only a fraction of the \$31 million that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration gave to 50 nonprofit organizations in 2004 for these programs.

On its Web site, *Worth the Wait* lists "101 Fun Things to Do (Besides Having Sex)," including making a scrapbook, bowling, and starting a band. It also calls drugs, sex, tobacco, violence, and alcohol five "risky behaviors," and claims that "indulging in one risky behavior leads to another and another. Before you know it you are stuck in the web with a cigarette in one hand, a beer in the other, the smell of weed in the background, a girl from your math class is in the back room having sex, and two drunk guys are about to fight over some girl!"

It's not clear in which peer-reviewed journal this theory was explained, tested, and verified, but it's a safe bet that it wasn't the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Another big winner in the government's no-safe-sex campaign is the Washington, D.C.-based Best Friends Foundation (BFF), which received a \$755,000 grant for its abstinence-only work. According to its Web site, BFF "promotes self-respect through the practice of self-control and provides participants the skills, guidance and support to choose abstinence from sex until marriage and reject illegal drug and alcohol use." BFF was established in 1987 by Elayne Bennett, who is married to William J. Bennett—a fellow at the hyperconservative Heritage Foundation and Claremont Institute, the former education secretary under Ronald Reagan, a lay preacher of all things virtuous, and a gambler who reportedly lost \$8 million on his gambling "habit" (he and his wife stressed that it wasn't an addiction and didn't conflict with his self-righteous moralizing).

BFF is also a favorite of the foundation world. From 2001 to 2003, this group brought in \$2.3 million in foundation grants, with nearly half of that amount coming from the Washington, D.C.-based J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation. Another \$500,000 came from the Case Foundation, which is endowed by America Online founder Stephen Case and also based in Washington, D.C. The Case Foundation in the past has given grants to evangelical groups such as the McLean Bible Church in Virginia, which has a history of pointing out the many sins of the "homosexual lifestyle." Case and his wife have also given personal contributions to the Westminster Academy, which was established by the vehemently anti-gay Coral Ridge Ministries. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided another \$200,000 to BFF, while the remaining grant dollars were donated in smaller amounts from a range of foundations.

Apparently the Marriotts, Cases, and other donors to BFF love the music of Bobby Vee, who had a No. 1 hit with "Take Good Care of My Baby" back in 1961. On the two most recent IRS

filings for the Best Friends Foundation, Vee is listed as one of the organization's five highest paid independent contractors for "donor dinner enter" [sic], earning nearly \$60,000 each year for his services. Given the Best Friends Foundation's mission, Vee probably didn't sing "One Last Kiss" or "Stranger in Your Arms," two of his other hits from the 1960s.

Of the 50 organizations that received abstinence-only grants from the Bush administration in 2004, 14—including BFF and the Scott and White Memorial Hospital—also received foundation grants from 2001 to 2003. About 75 different foundations gave out the grants, which totaled \$8.2 million during the period studied. More than \$7 million of this amount was given to organizations in New York state, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington, D.C.

With the Bush administration pledging to spend billions more dollars on its Faith-Based and Community Initiatives project in the coming years (which is the program that provides the support for the abstinence-only grants), foundations providing millions of dollars of support for the organizations that run these programs, and hundreds of nonprofits ready to lap up the public and private largesse, the nonprofit sector faces critical questions related to accountability. There is unbiased scientific evidence that abstinence-only programs (and others that are being funded through Bush's executive orders) do not work, and might actually hurt the recipients of these services.

The organizations that claim to lead the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, such as Independent Sector and the Council on Foundations, should be outraged that taxpayers are footing the bill for these bogus programs (either directly, through government grants, or indirectly, through tax breaks that foundations and nonprofit organizations receive). But one of Independent Sector's biggest Senate allies, Rick Santorum, R-Penn., champions these kinds of programs, and recently introduced an omnibus bill that calls for billions of dollars in funding for them, through the Compassion Capital Fund.

This bill also would attempt to reform welfare further and calls for government funding for a "healthy marriages" initiative (which is already being funded through an executive order from Bush, similar to how the abstinence-only programs are being funded). Because the bill also contains charitable-giving incentives that Independent Sector has been desperately trying to get passed into law, the chance of its leadership speaking out publicly and stridently on these very obvious and dire nonprofit accountability issues is unlikely.

The accountability issues raised here point to an even larger question that is plaguing the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors: What value does society—including taxpayers, the government, and (especially) the country's most disadvantaged citizens—get in return for the huge amounts of public money given directly and indirectly to nonprofits and foundations? Considering the current amount of media and government scrutiny of the sector in the wake of several years of high-profile scandals, Independent Sector, the Council on Foundations, and others should be doing everything they can to answer these questions. Instead, we have Independent Sector's Panel on the Nonprofit Sector spending millions of dollars on an accountability initiative that is led almost exclusively by large, wealthy, national organizations and foundations.

While the panel works from platitudes such as "A Vibrant Nonprofit Sector Is Essential for a Vital America," and obsesses over how many nonprofit executives must sign an organization's IRS Form 990, Bush and his allies in Congress are using the sector as a tool to please their conservative religious power bases. That Independent Sector and others willingly submit to such political manipulation is certainly disturbing. But what is most troubling is that their complicity could lead to hundreds of thousands of people being placed in harm's way, as well as the further tarnishing of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors' reputations. ○

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The report's findings indicate that social justice philanthropy is fraught with many definitional variations, as well as disagreements on how to apply social justice concepts to grantmaking. While many agree that social justice philanthropy is somehow concerned with a more equitable redistribution of economic, political, and social power, there is little consensus on what a more just society would look like, or if philanthropy is capable of fostering these changes.

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