

Texas House Bill Would Provide Contraception To CHIP Recipients, In Effort To Lower Teen Pregnancy Rates

The bill would amend the Children's Health Insurance Program to include things like IUDs and birth control pills.

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Martin Do Nascimento / KUT

State Rep. Donna Howard speaks in the Texas House chamber.

A newly introduced bill in the Texas House of Representatives would allow low-income teenagers in the Children's Health Insurance Program to receive free birth control, in an effort to reduce teen pregnancy in the state.

This legislative session, state Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, filed House Bill 835, which would make anyone enrolled in CHIP eligible for free contraceptive drugs like birth control pills, devices like IUDs, and other supplies, with written consent from a parent or legal guardian.

The bill would make a significant impact in decreasing maternal and infant mortality rates among teens and allow for better family planning, Howard said. As it stands, she said, young people are forced into parenthood at an early age, derailing adulthood before it begins.

"It has significantly huge impacts for the teen, who is then faced with the economics of starting a family before they were ready to, curtailing their educational and employment opportunities," Howard said.

The bill would not cover abortions.

Data from the legislative budget board indicated the bill would have a cost savings to Texas, Howard said. She hoped that would help convince her colleagues in the legislature to pass the measure, unlike previous attempts at similar legislation. A similar bill stalled in the Texas Senate in 2019.

"Over 50% of Texas' births are paid for by Medicaid," she said. "A significant number of those births could be averted by allowing avenues for these young people to access contraceptives. This could have a huge impact on their lives and on our state."

The bill is just one initiative supported by advocates, who see it as a part of a larger effort to help prevent low-income Texas teens from having unintended pregnancies.

The Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reported in January that 6% of 18-year-old girls enrolled in CHIP in 2018 experienced a documented pregnancy by the next year.

"Access to effective contraception is a key factor associated with the decline in teen pregnancy and teen birth rates," the campaign wrote in its report.

Texas is one of just two states in the nation that does not cover contraception in CHIP for purposes of pregnancy prevention, the other being North Dakota. While pregnancy rates are low among teenagers nationally, Texas still has the ninth-highest rate of teen birth nationwide, with a baby born to a teen mother once every 22 minutes, according to the campaign.

The organization argues that adding contraception as a benefit in CHIP would save money, both by reducing unintended teen pregnancy and by drawing an approximately 75% federal match for family planning services.

"By restricting access to birth control for Texans who rely on CHIP for their health care coverage, we're creating a barrier for young Texans who wish to avoid pregnancy, driving up health care costs for Medicaid and CHIP, and exacerbating troubling disparities in health outcomes for youth of color, those living in poverty and in rural areas," read a statement from Molly Clayton, executive director of the Texas Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Correction: A previous version of this story inaccurately described the federal government's match under CHIP. It would be about 75% for family planning services, not 90%.