



Alabama Campaign for Adolescent Sexual Health 2020 Policy Priorities

Alabama is significantly impacted by adverse sexual health outcomes such as unintended teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Alabama’s teen birth rate is ranked 42nd (1 = lowest, 50 = highest).¹ STIs represent a significant source of morbidity for adolescents and young adults age 15-24 years. Inadequate sexual health education, limited community-based resources, and lack of youth programs and services that are medically-accurate and age-appropriate are contributing factors to these adverse sexual health outcomes.

The Alabama Campaign for Adolescent Sexual Health envisions sexually healthy people and communities throughout Alabama and advances our mission to champion healthy adolescent development through evidence-informed sexual health education and services. We seek to achieve our vision and mission by ensuring policy makers propose, enact, and mandate policy that is supportive of evidence-informed programs, services, and practices. We also do this by ensuring youth-serving organizations throughout Alabama effectively and professionally deliver evidence-informed programs, services, and interventions. Right now, Alabama has the ability to:

(1) REMOVE HOMOPHOBIC LANGUAGE FROM THE ALABAMA SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION LAW

The issue: Alabama’s sexual health education law says that if sexual health education is taught, it must cover several topic points (Code of Alabama, 1975, § 16-40A-2) Among these points is “an emphasis, in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state.” Not only is this language harmful to young people, especially those that identify as LGBTQ, it is also factually inaccurate. Alabama’s sodomy ban was declared unconstitutional in 2014 and replaced with a law that bans nonconsensual sodomy (Code of Alabama, 1975, § 13A-6-63).² In June 2015 the United States Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage legal in all 50 states.

Why it matters: Sexual health education at its best is medically-accurate, age-appropriate, and inclusive of all young people. Teaching that homosexuality is “not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public” is entirely opinion-based. Using this language around young people, many of whom are struggling with sexual identity, is harmful.

¹ <https://powertodecide.org/what-we-do/information/national-state-data/alabama>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/06/a-man-cannot-be-raped-by-another-man-in-alabama/372973/>

What must be done: The Alabama Campaign has focused on this aspect of the sexual health education law for almost a decade, alongside partner organizations and young people. The Alabama Campaign continues to recommend that this section of the Alabama sexual health education law be removed.

(2) ENSURE EVIDENCE-INFORMED, AGE-APPROPRIATE SEX EDUCATION POLICIES AT THE LOCAL SCHOOL SYSTEM LEVEL

The issue: Sex education in Alabama is not mandated. Because it is not mandated, there is no accountability system for what is taught, to include the medical accuracy of what is taught. In 2019 the Alabama State Department of Education released its updated Alabama Course of Study: Health Education. In this updated version the health course of study reads: “It is highly recommended that local school systems develop and adopt a policy regarding the instruction of sex education content for their schools in accordance with law, regulations, and resolutions in age- and content-appropriate contexts.”

Why it matters: This is the first time that the Alabama State Department of Education has recommended that school systems develop their own local sex education policy. It is an opportunity for school systems to develop policies that are evidence-informed, medically-accurate, age-appropriate, inclusive, and free of bias and opinion.

What must be done: Every Alabama school system should adopt a sex education policy that is evidence-informed, medically-accurate, age-appropriate, and free of bias and opinion. The Alabama Campaign is committed to working with local school systems to develop sex education policies that follows the Health Course of Study and the sex education law, and that meet the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s adults.

(3) MANDATE COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE SEX EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The issue: Alabama does not mandate sexual health education in public schools; however, Alabama does mandate HIV/AIDS education. Alabama state law allows for the teaching of sexual health education, but there is not a requirement that the content of the education be age-appropriate, and the existing law is exclusionary of LGBTQ youth. The Alabama Health Course of Study suggests that each local school district should create its own local sex education policy.

Why it matters: Youth need the knowledge, skills, and access to sexual health education and services to protect their health throughout their lifetime. By mandating sexual health education that is comprehensive, inclusive, and evidence-informed, Alabama youth will have the tools they need to make smart decisions about their relationships and sexual health. Without this education, we will continue to see high rates of teen pregnancy and birth and rising rates of STIs and HIV.

What must be done: The Alabama Campaign recommends that the Alabama legislature amend the sexual health education law to make sexual health education comprehensive, inclusive, and mandatory for all public schools in the state. The Alabama Campaign recommends that age-appropriate longitudinal sexual health education programming be implemented yearly from kindergarten through 12th grade and include information regarding anatomy basics in language inclusive of all gender identities, consent, communication, diversity, and body autonomy.

(4) ENSURE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ACCESS FOR ALL ALABAMIANS

The issue: Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, insurers are required to provide pregnancy, maternity, and newborn care (before and after birth), preventative and wellness services, and birth control and breastfeeding coverage.³ This includes preventative services such as immunizations for HPV, STI prevention counseling, and syphilis screening for all adults without charging a co-pay. This also includes breast cancer screening, cervical cancer screening, HIV screening, domestic violence counseling, and well woman visits for all women without co-pay. The Trump administration has promised to repeal the ACA. Congress has made several attempts to repeal the ACA with no plan for replacement. They have successfully chipped away at key aspects of the law for the past several years. Additionally, Alabama is one of 14 states that have not expanded Medicaid, which would help the more than 100,000 working Alabamians living in the healthcare coverage gap receive healthcare.⁴ (The coverage gap refers to those people who make too much money to qualify for Medicaid, but for whom coverage in an employer-based or private insurance plan is still too expensive.)

Why it matters: Before the ACA, people seeking sexual and reproductive health services had to pay an insurance co-pay to see their doctor, plus a percentage of their visit that their insurance did not cover. Birth control access was limited to what the patient could afford to pay out of pocket. This led to many Americans choosing not to be seen for preventative services, screening, and birth control prescriptions. Those people who fall in the healthcare coverage gap do not have access to insurance at all and must pay for these services completely out of pocket or else not seek medical care when needed. This leads to many people avoiding preventative services.

What must be done: The Alabama Campaign believes that all Alabamians need access to sexual and reproductive health services in order to receive the care they need to lead healthy, productive lives. We recommend that the current administration see the value of the ACA and either keep it as law or replace it with a law that continues to cover these vital sexual and reproductive health services. Access to preventative care, particularly birth control, has undoubtedly impacted the falling unintended teen birth rates in this country and Alabama. We also recommend that the state of Alabama expand Medicaid coverage so that those who fall in the healthcare coverage gap can receive insurance benefits, including sexual and reproductive health services. Whether through a public or private insurer, all Alabamians should have access to sexual and reproductive health services.

³ <https://www.healthcare.gov/coverage/what-marketplace-plans-cover/>

⁴ <https://www.alarise.org/blog-posts/meet-the-working-men-and-women-caught-in-alabamas-health-coverage-gap/>