



For Immediate Release

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HHS Announcement an Historic Advance for Women's Health

U.S Health & Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius today made an historic advance for women's health by announcing that insurance companies must cover without co-pays such key women's preventive health services as contraception, breastfeeding supports and screening for gestational diabetes, HIV infection and domestic violence.

"Women across the country are cheering this decision," said Cindy Pearson, co-founder of Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need and Executive Director of the National Women's Health Network. "We know that contraception and other preventive care is essential to our ability to stay healthy and detect disease early. This decision means that cost barriers like insurance company co-pays and deductibles will no longer stop women from getting the health care we need."

The HHS announcement followed the release by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of a report, *Clinical Preventive Services for Women: Closing the Gaps*, which had been commissioned by HHS. The IOM was asked to recommend which women's health services should be added to the list of preventive services that are already exempt from insurance co-pays and deductibles under the Affordable Care Act health reform law.

RWV noted with disappointment, however, HHS' announcement of its intent to offer religious employers the ability to refuse to provide contraceptive coverage to their employees. "We believe all women should be entitled to full coverage of preventive women's health services, including contraception, regardless of what their employers may believe," said RWV co-founder Lois Uttley. "We will review HHS' proposal carefully and urge that any exemption for religious employers be crafted as narrowly as possible."

The IOM's committee of experts found sufficient evidence to support eight recommendations, including a comprehensive approach to contraceptive care "so that women can better avoid unwanted pregnancies and space their pregnancies to promote optimal birth outcomes." They also recommended removing co-pays for an annual well-woman's visit; lactation support and counseling for pregnant and postpartum women, including the cost of renting breast-feeding equipment; as well as and screening and counseling for interpersonal and domestic violence.

"This decision creates a powerful tool for improving the health of all women," said RWV's Pearson. "By removing the cost barriers that cause women to skip or delay preventive care, HHS is enabling early detection of disease and health risks and avoidance of serious health problems, like diabetes." Contraception, she noted, allows women to plan and space pregnancies, contributing to earlier use of prenatal care and folic acid and reduced incidence of pre-term births and low birth-weight babies. Breastfeeding also improves babies' health.

The law allows insurance companies up to one year to make such changes. The additional services included in the IOM recommendations will be covered without cost sharing in new health plans starting in August 2012, one year following the HHS decision.

Raising Women's Voices is a national initiative working to ensure that the promise of health reform is fulfilled for women and our families. RWV is a collaboration of three national organizations -- the Avery Institute for Social Change, the National Women's Health Network and the MergerWatch Project -- and 22 state-based women's health organizations in 20 states.

www.RaisingWomensVoices.net