

98-01

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Support for Minors' Access to Confidential Health Services

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) urges organizations to do the following:

- Provide adolescents access to timely confidential healthcare services, including counseling, testing, and treatment for sexually transmitted infection (STI)-related immunizations; STIs and other communicable diseases; reproductive health (including abstinence education, contraception, and pregnancy); mental and behavioral health (including alcohol, tobacco, and substance use); sexual and physical abuse; and other health issues important to protecting adolescent and community health, without a requirement for parental/guardian consent or notification; and
- Ensure that information documenting the delivery of health services (e.g., healthcare insurance explanation of benefits, health services billing statements, immunization records, etc.) of the type outlined above be kept confidential following completion of such services.
- Organizations serving adolescents and/or families should facilitate the development of open communication between adolescents and their families about adolescent healthcare decisions.

Justification

Adolescents, while generally healthy, may engage in risk-taking behaviors that can lead to adverse individual and public health consequences.¹ Both individuals and communities benefit from the prevention, prompt diagnosis, and treatment of STIs, other communicable diseases, and physical and sexual abuse; the nurturing of sound mental and behavioral health; preparedness for sexual responsibility, pregnancy, and parenting; and early and comprehensive prenatal care.

Family involvement in adolescent sexual health and mental and behavioral healthcare decisions is ideal. Comprehensive counseling and skill-building can delay the onset of sexual activity.² The social, health, and behavioral challenges faced by adolescents can be mitigated through community support and intervention offered by families, schools, local health departments and other healthcare providers, churches, and others.³

Providers should act in accordance with principles of medical ethics when caring for adolescents facing medical emergencies. Adolescents are less likely to seek healthcare, particularly for problems of a sensitive nature, if parental knowledge is required.⁴⁻⁷ Adolescents who seek education and services for STIs and other communicable diseases; reproductive health; mental and behavioral health; and sexual and physical abuse need prompt confidential access to care in order to protect their own health and the health of others.⁸ In addition, confidentiality must be maintained consistently and comprehensively. For example, healthcare insurance plan billing statements, immunization records listing STI-related immunizations, and healthcare insurance



explanation of benefit statements that are sent to or accessed by a parent or legal guardian of an adolescent that lists any service outlined above can compromise confidentiality and present a barrier to care.⁹

Record of Action

Adopted by NACCHO Board of Directors, Feb. 26, 1998

Updated March 2005

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¹ American Medical Association. (1995). Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services (GAPS): Recommendations for Physicians and Other Health Professionals.

² The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2000). ACOG Statement of Policy: Providing Effective Contraception to Minors and Reproductive Health Services for Adolescents.

³ Kirby, D. (2007). Emerging Answers 2007. Research and Findings on Programs to Reduce and Prevent Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases. The National Campaign to Prevention Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

⁴ American Medical Association, Council on Scientific Affairs. (1993). Confidential Health Services for Adolescents. *Journal of the American Medical Association*; 269:1420–1424.

⁵ The Alan Guttmacher Institute. (1997). Issues in Brief: Welfare Reform, Marriage, and Sexual Behavior.

⁶ Ford, C.A., English, A. (2002). Limiting confidentiality of adolescent health services: What are the risks? *Journal of the American Medical Association*; 288:752–753.

⁷ Reddy, D.M., Fleming, R., Swain, C. (2002). Effect of mandatory parental notification on adolescent girls' use of sexual health care services. *Journal of the American Medical Association*; 288:710–714.

⁸ Society for Adolescent Medicine. (2004). Confidential health care for adolescents: Position paper of the Society for Adolescent Medicine. *Journal of Adolescent Health*; 35:160-167.

⁹ Fox, H. and Limb, S. (2008). State policies affecting the assurance of confidential care for adolescents. The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health.