

98-01

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Minors' Access to Confidential Health Services

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) urges organizations that serve adolescents and/or families to do the following:

- Allow adolescents to consent to receive timely, confidential healthcare services related to prevention, testing, and treatment of communicable diseases, including vaccine-preventable diseases and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), without a requirement for parental/guardian consent or notification;
- Allow adolescents to consent to receive timely, confidential healthcare services related to 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;
- Ensure information documenting the delivery of healthcare services (e.g., healthcare insurance explanation of benefits, health services billing statements, immunization records) of the type outlined above be kept confidential following completion of such services; and
- Facilitate the development of open communication between adolescents and their families about adolescent healthcare decisions.

Justification

Both individuals and communities benefit from the prevention, prompt diagnosis, and treatment of communicable diseases, including vaccine-preventable diseases and STIs; the prevention, identification and treatment of 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. Timely, confidential healthcare services are critical for adolescents, particularly due to their physical, cognitive, and emotional development during adolescence. These services mitigate the day-to-day exposures to and advance the prevention, testing, and treatment of communicable diseases among adolescents. Additionally, they address risk-taking behaviors that can lead to adverse individual and public health consequences.¹ For these reasons, allowing adolescents to consent to receive timely, confidential healthcare services, as well as increasing awareness among adolescents, parents/guardians, and providers about minor consent, are essential.

Providers should act in accordance with the principles of medical ethics when caring for adolescents in routine and/or acute care settings. Adolescents are less likely to seek healthcare, particularly for problems of a sensitive nature, if parental knowledge is required.²⁻⁴ Thus,



although family involvement in adolescent sexual health and mental and behavioral healthcare decisions is ideal whenever possible, allowing adolescents' consent may reduce barriers to timely healthcare services. Adolescents who seek education and services for communicable diseases, including vaccine-preventable diseases and STIs; 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.⁵ In addition, confidentiality must be maintained consistently and comprehensively. For example, healthcare insurance plan billing statements, immunization records, and healthcare insurance explanation of benefit statements that list any service outlined above, which are sent to or accessed by an adolescent's parent or legal guardian, can compromise confidentiality and present a barrier to care.⁶

References

1. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2009). Adolescent health services: Missing opportunities. The Committee on Adolescent Health Care Services and Models of Care for Treatment, Prevention, and Healthy Development.
2. The Alan Guttmacher Institute. (2015). State policies in brief: An overview of minors' consent law.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Fox, H. and Limb, S. (2008). State policies affecting the assurance of confidential care for adolescents. The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health.

Record of Action

Proposed by NACCHO Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Workgroup

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