

# Policy Brief: STIs

## Planned Parenthood Provides Essential Services to Reduce the High Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections and Unintended Pregnancy in the US

### Background

According to the most recent data from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are at “an unprecedented high in the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> An estimated 20 million new STIs occur annually, with health care costs of up to \$16 billion. Many infections that have increased, including chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis, can be cured with antibiotics, but if left undiagnosed can cause dramatic health problems for men and women, especially women at risk of pregnancy. Women with untreated chlamydia or gonorrhea can develop Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) leading to ectopic pregnancy and tubal factor infertility. These STIs jeopardize the health of infants as well, including risks of prematurity, low birth weight, seizures and even fetal or neonatal death.

Young people up to age 25 years are at highest risk of STI acquisition in the US, accounting for half of all new STIs. One in four sexually active adolescents has an STI.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, low-income Americans, as well as racial/ethnic minorities, who may have more restricted access to health services, are at higher STI risks. This very same population is at highest risk of unintended pregnancy, which accounts for almost half of all pregnancies.<sup>3</sup> The Affordable Care Act (ACA), which is under assault, has increased insurance coverage for young adults between 19 and 26, the age group at highest risk.<sup>4</sup> Medicaid expansions helped low-income people to afford these essential services, and research has shown that many states with the highest STIs did not expand Medicaid coverage after the ACA was passed.<sup>5</sup> Young people who perceive themselves as healthy, as well as families with low incomes, are precisely those who would be less likely to be insured and to access care without the ACA and Medicaid expansions.

### Planned Parenthood is an essential provider of services to confront the STI epidemic.

These infections can be asymptomatic, so provider screenings are essential to protect the reproductive health of adolescents and young adults, as well as high-risk individuals. Planned Parenthood affiliated health centers are essential providers of STI screening and treatment throughout the US, providing 4.2 million tests and treatments for STIs per year. Planned

- STIs and unintended pregnancy rates are extremely high in the United States.
- A new UCSF-PPFA study proves that an intervention to increase access to highly-effective LARC methods among teens and young adults helps to cut unintended pregnancy without jeopardizing condom use and STI prevention.
- Planned Parenthood is a critical provider of women’s health care services in the US and this rigorous research with Planned Parenthood highlights the excellent care to address the STI epidemic and reduce unintended pregnancy.

Parenthood health centers offer youth-friendly features, such as high confidentiality and extended hours. Over the past 10 years, comprehensive providers, such as Planned Parenthood, have become much more prominent providers of STI prevention and treatment than stand-alone STI clinics. Only 4.5% of chlamydia cases among women were reported through an STI clinic in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Patients increasingly prefer providers that can comprehensively address all of their reproductive health needs.

## Planned Parenthood offers patients high-quality contraceptive care together with STI services.

Several well-publicized initiatives have launched in the past few years to address high unintended pregnancy rates in the US. The most successful ones have been those that increase access to the full range of contraceptive methods including the most effective methods, such as IUDs and implants, or LARC (long-acting reversible contraceptives).<sup>6,7</sup> With the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine (UCSF), PPFA participated in a randomized trial, which produces the highest level of scientific evidence, of one such intervention to increase access to the full range of contraception including LARCs. The randomized intervention with 1,500 women across the US was the first to successfully reduce unintended pregnancy among family planning patients,<sup>8</sup> and received an award for its positive impact on patient health.<sup>9</sup> The UCSF Beyond the Pill Program has scaled the intervention with PPFA, reaching over 500,000 contraceptive patients at Planned Parenthood health centers yearly.

Despite the success of efforts to increase access to LARC methods, concerns have arisen that LARC use could result in lower condom use and increased STI risk among adolescents and young adults.<sup>10</sup> PPFA has helped address those concerns by participating in this rigorous study. A new analysis of the intervention, published in January 2017, shows that increasing LARC access neither compromised condom use nor increased STI incidence among women aged 18-25 years.<sup>11</sup> This is the first large study across the US that has examined dual method use (condoms together with a contraceptive) and STI incidence within a randomized experiment to increase access to long-acting contraception.

By combining family planning services and STI care, Planned Parenthood gives young people the services they need to prevent both unintended pregnancy and STI acquisition. As a result, young people can enter adulthood with good reproductive health and on track to achieve the futures they desire. Planned Parenthood plays an important role in reducing STI rates by being a leading provider in STI testing and treatment. At a moment when STIs are at an unprecedented high, eliminating access to Planned Parenthood—a provider that specializes in STI care—would have devastating effects and would lead to increased STI rates nationwide—affecting fertility and maternal and child health.

## Sources

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