

Bush appoints “choose life” conservative to head family-planning programs

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The Bush administration, catering to the extreme right-wing constituency in the Republican Party, has appointed yet another abortion opponent to a top post in the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Eric Keroack, medical director of a Christian pregnancy counseling agency, will assume the position of deputy assistant secretary for population affairs in two weeks, where he will have considerable authority over both the Office of Family Planning and the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs. The appointment, which did not require Senate confirmation, flies in the face of the recent electoral rejection of anti-abortion proposals and candidates throughout the country.

A Woman's Concern, the Massachusetts-based family planning agency Keroack currently directs, opposes contraception on moral grounds and does not distribute contraceptives or educational materials on contraception at its six locations. The organization's web site states, “A Woman's Concern is persuaded that the crass commercialization and distribution of birth control is demeaning to women, degrading to human sexuality and adverse to human health and happiness.”

Rather than provide access to contraceptives or education about protecting against sexually transmitted diseases, the organization promotes abstinence, or “sexual purity and self-mastery,” claiming without basis that “distribution of birth control, especially among adolescents, actually increases out-of-wedlock pregnancy and abortion.”

Agencies such as A Woman's Concern now outnumber abortion providers in the US. Most of the more than 2,000 anti-abortion “crisis counseling” facilities have opened within the past few years using federal funds earmarked for providing access to contraceptives. There is little doubt that this trend will escalate under Keroack. Many of these facilities set up

shop directly adjacent to Planned Parenthood and other family planning clinics in an effort to confuse women seeking abortions and lure them in.

The federal family planning program Keroack will oversee currently allocates \$283 million in grants to 4,600 family planning clinics, which provide counseling to 5 million people each year. According to the HHS, the federal grants are “designed to provide access to contraceptive supplies and information to all who want and need them with priority given to low-income persons.” Bush administration spokespersons have insisted that Keroack's anti-abortion and anti-contraception views will not interfere with the duties of his post, but it could hardly be otherwise.

A November 17 report by the *Boston Globe* cited Keroack's “trailblazing” role in the anti-abortion movement for his introduction of ultrasound images into pregnancy counseling sessions. Keroack is also well known for comparing premarital sexual relationships to illicit drug use and has been a vociferous advocate of abstinence-only sex education.

According to the *Globe*, when the American Medical Association recommended against teaching abstinence-only education in 2004, Keroack disagreed, saying in the *Washington Times*, “Abstinence education is the first mechanism that has actually made a positive impact on the devastation caused by the errant sexual education programs of the 1970s and 1980s.”

At Brandeis University's Christian Awareness Week in 2002, Keroack likened the modern conception of sexuality to warfare. “Sexual activity is a war zone,” he told an audience during a panel discussion. “What we have is this ongoing war. So we're constantly coming up with better equipment.... And the truth is that somewhere along the way people die in war.”

In 2003, Keroack delivered a PowerPoint presentation

before the International Abstinence Leadership Conference in which he purported to scientifically demonstrate that a premarital relationship corrupts the ability to emotionally bond with subsequent partners or children. One slide announced, “PRE-MARITAL SEX is really MODERN GERM WARFARE.” In another, comparing unmarried sexual relationships to cocaine, Keroack listed the “drawbacks” of drug use: “ADDICTING, RAPID TOLERANCE, EXTREMELY SHORT-ACTING, **ILLEGAL.**”

This moral menacing has nothing to do either with science or democratic society. However, the appointment of an individual espousing anti-choice views is wholly in line with the extremist position of the Bush administration toward science and civil liberties in general.

One of Bush’s first acts in office in 2001 was the banning of federal funds for women’s aid groups abroad that helped procure abortions and contraceptives, and the administration introduced further funding cuts for international family planning groups this year. In his first budget, Bush removed the requirement that contraceptives be covered by insurance companies participating in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. Congress passed the first-ever federal ban on abortion three years ago and has restricted gynecologic care for women in the military. Congress also passed the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, granting a fertilized egg legal status as a separate human being from a woman against whom violence is perpetrated in the course of any one of 68 federal offenses.

The Bush administration has inserted no small number of individuals into scientific and public policy positions whose conservative views essentially constitute a conflict of interest, including the right-wing HHS secretary, Mike Leavitt. The HHS is the largest department in the federal government, encompassing Medicare, Medicaid, the Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and several other agencies. Leavitt has pushed through numerous divestitures of elementary social programs and dubious deals with the pharmaceutical industry since he was appointed by Bush two years ago.

The FDA in particular has been compromised by the meddling of religious groups and big business. Lobbying and the appointment of unqualified

ideologues in the FDA have generated several rounds of resignations, and created an atmosphere of unscrupulousness, mistrust, and disorder within the agency.

Last year, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigation into the FDA’s rejection of the Plan B contraceptive found numerous deviations from procedure, both scientific and legal, aimed at imposing religious restrictions on the basic civil liberties of women.

After the Plan B contraceptive was given long-overdue approval, FDA leadership denied it over-the-counter status, and a special provision was created allowing anti-choice physicians and pharmacists to refuse emergency contraceptives on moral grounds.

The US population, on the other hand, overwhelmingly supports the protection of a woman’s right to contraceptives and abortion services, as well as sex education that includes information about contraceptives rather than “abstinence-only” programs.



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