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Antiabortion Groups Push Bush on Clinics' Subsidies

By **STEPHANIE SIMON**
May 23, 2008; Page A3

With time running out on the Bush administration, conservative activists are renewing a drive for regulations that would deny federal subsidies to clinics that provide abortions or counsel women about the option.

In a final push, the activists are preparing a public campaign to pressure President Bush to use his executive authority to order the change. They say they soon will present the White House with a petition signed by tens of thousands of voters and a letter endorsed by at least 70 conservative organizations, including the Family Research Council, the Eagle Forum and Concerned Women for America.

On the Line
Federal family-planning grants through Title X of the Public Health Service Act subsidize care for five million low-income men and women at 4,400 health centers across the country.

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| <p>Services funded in 2006 paid for under Title X</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 2.5 million Pap tests ■ 2.4 million breast exams ■ 5.2 million tests for sexually transmitted diseases ■ 650,000 HIV tests <p><small>Source: National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association</small></p> | <p>Patient demographics</p> <p>AT OR BELOW FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL (receive free health care)</p> <p>67%</p> <hr/> <p>AT OR BELOW 200% OF POVERTY LEVEL (receive discounted services)</p> <p>90%</p> <hr/> <p>BLACK</p> <p>19%</p> <hr/> <p>HISPANIC</p> <p>15%</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

"President Bush has defined himself as a pro-life president, and this is definitely something he should see as part of his legacy," said Jessica Echard, executive director of the Eagle Forum.

The federal government distributes about \$280 million a year among thousands of clinics to subsidize the cost of birth control, cancer screening, HIV testing and other reproductive care for low-income patients. Known as Title X, the program serves five million men and women a year. By law, the money

can't be used for abortion procedures.

But about one-third of Title X patients receive their care at reproductive-health clinics run by Planned Parenthood, which is also the nation's largest abortion provider. Critics say the federal grants indirectly subsidize Planned Parenthood's abortion services by keeping a steady stream of money flowing into the clinics.

Two decades ago, President Reagan imposed rules barring clinics that receive Title X money from performing abortions or referring patients to abortion clinics. Opponents filed suit, and the regulations were put on hold for years as the court battle played out. The U.S. Supreme Court eventually upheld the regulations -- but a year and a half later, President Clinton took office and rescinded them.

Since Mr. Bush took office, activists on the right have been pleading with him to reinstate the Reagan-era rules. In one of his first official acts as president, he imposed restrictions on foreign family-planning aid, preventing U.S. grants from going to groups that perform or promote abortion. He has declined, however, to implement that rule domestically, a stance that has baffled and frustrated his allies in the antiabortion movement.

The White House didn't respond to repeated requests to comment.

New regulations, which wouldn't require congressional approval, could take several forms. Title X recipients could be required to physically and legally wall off their abortion work from other health-care services. Women's health experts say such a rule could require a costly overhaul of clinic buildings and bureaucracy.


Providers who receive Title X money also could be barred from discussing abortion with their patients. Many clinics likely would refuse Title X money rather than accept such restrictions -- an outcome that could reduce poor women's access to birth control and gynecological exams, said Mary Jane Gallagher, chief executive of the National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association, a trade group representing clinics.

"There's a really strong chance that this is going to happen," Ms. Gallagher said.

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Last week, state officials that distribute Title X grants received an email from a federal consultant asking which Planned Parenthood affiliates receive federal money, and how much. A spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services said the email was prompted by a congressional inquiry. She declined to comment on whether a regulatory change is in the works.

Concerned about the prospect of new restrictions, a dozen members of Congress this week sent Mr. Bush a letter urging him to keep Title X regulations intact. Changes could "block critical health-care coverage for many Americans," they wrote. Most of the signatories were Republicans, including Rep. Christopher Shays of Connecticut and Rep. Kay Granger of Texas.

Rewriting the regulations might not affect clinic operations in the long term: Activists on both sides agree that a Democratic president would be almost certain to rescind the rules.

But antiabortion groups are hoping for another Republican administration. They say they would like Mr. Bush to take care of Title X reform now, to spare the man they hope will succeed him -- Sen. John McCain -- the political fallout. "It would be nicer for McCain to have this already done before he gets into office," said Tom McClusky, vice president of government affairs for the Family Research Council.

Activists also are trying to rouse support for a bill to be introduced this summer by Rep. Mike Pence, Republican of Indiana. Mr. Pence -- who says he is "befuddled" by Mr. Bush's inaction on this issue -- would like to strip all Title X funding from Planned Parenthood.

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America relies on government grants and contracts, including Title X, for roughly a third of its nearly \$337 million budget, according to its most recent financial report. A spokeswoman for the nonprofit group declined to speculate on the effect of new Title X restrictions, beyond expressing concern for patients.

The Family Research Council, meanwhile, has asked supporters to pray for a Title X overhaul and the downfall of "the pro-abortion 'evil empire.' "

Write to Stephanie Simon at stephanie.simon@wsj.com

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