

Anti-abortion billboards divide and distract

Belle Taylor-McGhee

Monday, June 27, 2011



The Bay Area now has its own taste of the offensive billboards sponsored by anti-abortion groups that target African American women. Earlier this month, dozens of billboards went up around Oakland that read "Black & Beautiful" and are anchored to an anti-abortion website: toomanyaborted.com/ca. These billboards place African American women at the center of a propaganda campaign over a basic health care procedure that is both legal and safe, while ignoring the realities of the barriers the black community faces in health access and outcomes.

Abortion opponents have put up similar billboards across the United States in a multimillion-dollar campaign, mostly in cities with a large black population - including New York and Atlanta. And African Americans are not the only targets. Bilingual billboards in Los Angeles targeting Latinas recently went up, some of which quickly came down because of community pressure.

But the issue isn't really where abortion opponents place their billboards - it's what they hope to gain. First and foremost, abortion opponents want to make abortion illegal - and are hoping these billboards will persuade more African Americans to support their goal. Secondly, they purport to claim some moral authority over black women's private medical decision making about childbearing.

As an African American woman, I find the billboard campaign both racist and offensive: racist because it singles out a group of people - black women. And offensive because it dares to insinuate that black women are not intelligent enough to decide for themselves what is best for them and their families. I frankly don't know of any black woman who consults the Radiance Foundation or Issues4Life Foundation - groups behind the billboards - when she is making a decision about whether or when to have a child.

African Americans cannot afford to be divided and distracted by salacious billboards that exploit black children and insult black women. The truth is that poor black women have historically had less access to affordable health services such as birth control than any other ethnic group. This access gap leads to greater health disparities, including more unintended pregnancies.

These billboards - and the money spent to fund them - do nothing to address health disparities that harm our community. Instead, they divert our attention from the economic and political barriers that result in poor health for black women and their families. We must stay focused on the policy debates that undermine access to family planning services for poor women, including access to government safety nets



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that abortion opponents are working hard to defund - such as the Title X program, the only federal grant program dedicated solely to family planning.

Recent national research commissioned by the Ford Foundation on behalf of Trust Black Women, a national partnership of African American women in support of black women's reproductive autonomy, shows that the majority of African Americans support increased access to contraception and comprehensive sex education. This research also shows that, at the end of the day, most African Americans trust black women to make their own decisions about childbearing.

Reproductive justice advocates in the Oakland area are getting that message out to the billboard owners, CBS Outdoor. We are demanding that the billboards come down - activating an online petition drive starting today. Meanwhile, we've secured the support of elected officials, including Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, and Oakland Mayor Jean Quan, who will stand with us and not cave in when our health and lives are on the line.

Belle Taylor-McGhee is national communications chair for Trust Black Women and a longtime women's health advocate in San Francisco.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/06/27/EDKS1K21UI.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 8** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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