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Introduction

In the months following the 2004 presidential elections, research showed that there was broad public support for a host of reproductive rights, women's equality and other family health issues. However, elected officials and policy makers did not recognize this nor did they take advantage of it.

At the same time, political fundamentalists and the religious right repeatedly portrayed progressives as extremists, while a handful of conservative elites (about 10-15 percent of the electorate) successfully promoted an extreme right-wing agenda around abstinence-only sex education and opposition to birth control. Their efforts have resulted in the chipping away of women's constitutional rights under *Roe v. Wade* and the decline in real dollars of federal financial support for comprehensive sex education and family planning.

In addition, some political pundits were reviewing the role of abortion in George W. Bush's victory in 2004. Some were claiming that abortion was a leading reason for Kerry's loss in 2004 presidential election even though exit polls showed that abortion was cited by only 4-5 percent of voters as a top concern. And further, Kerry's position on abortion and other women's rights issues was rarely discussed and often muddled.

It was in this context that in late 2005, the Women Donors Network and the Communications Consortium Media Center created, *Moving Forward*, a research-based initiative to test and develop a new, expanded frame and language on reproductive health that can win policy debates and deepen public understanding without compromising support for abortion rights. We also sought to build upon those issues that American voters overwhelmingly support: birth control, comprehensive sexual education, end-of-life issues, stem cell research, the HPV vaccine and emergency contraception. This background paper outlines the work that has been accomplished since December 2005 as well as the activities we will undertake through 2008.

Background

The vast majority of Americans supports policies that enable individuals to take care of themselves and their families and respect their rights to make important decisions about that care. Strong support also continues for a research agenda that advances medical science and technological breakthroughs. However, conservatives' singular focus on abortion has hijacked progress on these policies and has monopolized public discussion of them. As a result, critical public policies on a range of health-related matters, including family health issues and reproductive rights, are in jeopardy.

The organized opposition to family planning has taken the public policy debate to the extreme edge, portraying the pro-choice community as advocates for abortion on demand at any point in a pregnancy. This misrepresentation means that not only are legal rights under *Roe v. Wade* under serious threat, but that reasonable discussion and policy advances on a wide range of issues from birth control and sex education to stem cell research also are stymied.

The reality is that every day women throughout America worry about getting pregnant, having a healthy pregnancy and safe delivery, staying healthy after pregnancy or monitoring hormone levels as they age. Yet despite a decade of solid public support for safe and legal abortions – from 65 to 75 percent among both women and men – efforts to address other reproductive health issues are constantly overshadowed by the political point/counterpoint on abortion. In other words, basic reproductive and health rights are jeopardized by the polarizing focus on abortion. Supporters of women's rights, both in the advocacy community and in the political arena, are being portrayed as extremists, and are losing on core issues despite the fact that the American public is behind them in large numbers.

The conservatives' persistent focus on abortion has made it impossible to capitalize on the common ground the vast majority of Americans share around a host of issues. These range from basic reproductive rights issues, such as access to birth control and comprehensive sexuality education, to a broader set of related issues such as stem cell research and control of life-and-death decisions.

Americans have been constant and strong in their support of values central to the American dream. These core values – Responsibility to care for one's family, Responsibility to care for oneself, Personal liberty, Spirituality, Honesty, Integrity, Fairness and Equality – animate and fuel efforts to strengthen reproductive health and rights in America. A framework that

includes a reproductive health agenda and highlights issues such as access to birth control, comprehensive sex education, and women's reproductive health research taps into these core values.

Just as opponents of legal abortion have wrapped their repressive anti-abortion and anti-birth control agenda in the banner of a "culture of life" and have reframed their creationist religious agenda as "intelligent design," our mission will be to engage thoughtful, creative people in a process of *moving forward* to explore the strongest possible frames and hopefully reclaim the agenda of advancing reproductive rights.

2006-2008 Activities:

The Women Donors Network and the Communications Consortium Media Center, with additional funding from the Wallace Alexander Gerbode, The David and Lucile Packard, and Tides foundations, the Brico Fund, and other funders, have embarked on a project, *Moving Forward*, that will put us on the path toward creating this shift and breaking the logjam that has held up progressive policies. The project will test existing frames on reproductive health versus those frames that opponents to abortion use, and will explore newer, stronger frames that connect key elements of a progressive, reproductive rights agenda with the core values of American women and men. Our hope is that a policy agenda to improve Americans' reproductive health can move forward, while at the same time ensuring that the right to abortion as currently defined under the Constitution is preserved.

Studies by DDB Issues & Advocacy show that abortion rights and reproductive health groups are now using eight to 10 different message frames. Some relate to an individual's "right to choose," or "who decides?" Others relate to "woman in the context of family and community," "preventing unwanted pregnancy" and "promoting healthy families." Health, equality and justice also are common themes. Some activists see the word "choice" as now devalued by consumer advertising to evoke shopping, a frame that is ineffective when used against the value-based "life" frame.

The goals of *Moving Forward* are to:

1. Test and develop a new, expanded frame and language on reproductive health that can help win policy debates, deepen public support and achieve policy change but does not compromise support for abortion rights.

2. Build on the voter support for policies that enable individuals to take care of themselves and their families, and respect their right to make important decisions about their care.

Moving Forward has three phases:

Phase One: *Timeline: November 2005 – March 2006 (Complete)*

- 1) Facilitate sessions among 200+ stakeholders to collect ideas and concerns, build a foundation of collaboration, consensus and ownership of the process, and identify those activists willing to collaborate regularly on an intensive schedule;
- 2) Thoroughly analyze existing public opinion and focus group findings on abortion, reproductive health/rights/justice and a limited number of issues related to the “culture of life” agenda; and
- 3) Develop a list of possible frames, conduct initial testing of these, and winnow them down to a smaller list for future testing.

Phase Two: *Timeline: April – August 2006 (Complete)*

- 1) Conduct additional research using both tested and new technologies to fill any research gaps;
- 2) Disseminate findings to the reproductive rights community, policymakers and agenda setters;
- 3) Develop message memos and talking points; and,
- 4) Form a Communications Strategy Group composed of the key partners identified in Phase One.

Phase Three: *Timeline: September 2006 – December 2008*

- 1) Develop an infrastructure to bring the strongest frames to select target audiences, media and the general public, through toolkits, briefing books, sophisticated Web sites and online resources.
- 2) Once the infrastructure is developed, tested and implemented, we will focus on leaving in place sustainable systems to benefit numerous organizations, policymakers and agenda-setters over the long haul.

Here are some of the critical questions we will continue to explore:

Can all the current differing frames co-exist and still be effective? Do we want them all? Are any implicit values and frames in our messages unintended, as has happened around the word “choice”? What are these messages’ implicit or explicit aspirations and visions for society? How can we broaden the reproductive health discussion and fit it within a frame of values that Americans can understand and connect to their daily lives? Which frames will prompt policymakers to move beyond abortion and engage in a solution-oriented debate on a reproductive health agenda? Which frames will not only create an agenda that enjoys consensus support of women and men, but will move them to act?

We hope to answer these questions and more in *Moving Forward* in a way that will benefit the reproductive health and progressive communities to promote our agenda now and in the foreseeable future. We hope you will join us in this effort.

For more information, visit: www.ImportantLifeDecisions.org.