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**Leading Hispanic Organizations and National Coalition Urge Community to Take Advantage of Recommended Preventive Sexual Health Services**

**Access to Health Services at Risk**

Washington, DC – Today, the [National Coalition for Sexual Health](#) (NCSH), in collaboration with leading Hispanic organizations, including [California Latinas for Reproductive Justice](#) and the [Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights \(COLOR\)](#), issued a call-to-action to increase awareness and improve the low uptake of essential preventive sexual health services in the Hispanic community. They also launched a free, easy-to-use Spanish-language guide and website, [TOME EL CONTROL DE SU SALUD SEXUAL](#) to help people get the services they need. It features charts of recommended services for women and men, questions to ask health care providers, and other resources.

These vital services, including the HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccine, contraceptives, pap smears, and screenings for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia and HIV, can protect and improve sexual health, and even save lives. They can help prevent male and female cancers, plan pregnancies, prevent and detect infections, and safeguard fertility.

However, many Hispanics are not benefiting from these services, which are currently available for free or low cost through the Affordable Care Act (ACA). At the same time, access is now in jeopardy given the possible repeal of the ACA, potential changes to the essential benefits package and a likely reduction in access to family planning services.

"While the Latino community is the fastest growing group in the U.S., we have historically been the largest uninsured population," said Ena Suseth Valladares, MPH, Director of Research, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice. "But, thanks to increased levels of coverage through the ACA, an unprecedented number of Latinos (75%) can currently access -- at no cost -- these highly recommended preventive sexual health services."

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"While we are making significant progress, a large part of our population remains uninsured and lacks access to affordable health care. At the same time, some members of our community might be afraid to seek these services given increased enforcement of immigration policies. However, we must continue to support everyone to be able to take advantage of these services, particularly Latinas, who are often the lifeline of the family," said Valladares.

Although the annual ACA open enrollment period is now closed, many uninsured Hispanics are still eligible for coverage through federal programs such as Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). And many people – with or without insurance -- can obtain free or low cost preventive services through various local providers (e.g., [community health centers](#), Planned Parenthood clinics, [migrant health centers](#), local health departments, and [free & charitable clinics](#)).

"We need to get informed about our options and make sure that we take care of ourselves and our families. Also, many community-based health centers and clinics provide services regardless of immigration status. We cannot afford to put our health on hold. Together, we can create strong, healthy, financially stable families and shape a brighter future for our community," said Cristina Aguilar, Executive Director, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR). To learn more about "How to Access Recommended Preventive Sexual Health Services: With or Without Health Insurance" visit [here](#).

Unfortunately, many Hispanics, even those with insurance, are not currently benefiting from these important preventive services, which are vital to overall health and well-being. For example, regular pap smears can help detect precancerous changes and lead to treatment before cancer develops. Yet, nearly one in four Hispanic women (ages 18-65) did not have a pap smear within the past three years. "Early detection of cervical cancer is particularly important for Hispanic women who have the highest rate of cervical cancer among all racial/ethnic groups. And, since they are often diagnosed late, their death rate is one-third higher than white women," said Ana G. Cepín, MD, Assistant Professor of Obstetrics & Gynecology, Columbia University. "*Ladies*, it's time to give your health the attention it deserves, for you and for the other people in your life who depend on you."

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection, and nearly everyone will get at least one type of HPV. The HPV vaccine is the first and *only* vaccine that can protect both women and men against many types of HPV-associated cancers as well as genital warts. Yet, in 2015, less than half (46%) of Hispanic girls and only about a third (35%) of Hispanic boys received the recommended vaccine series.

"Since nearly *everyone* will be exposed to HPV at some point in their life, it's essential that everyone who is eligible gets vaccinated. *Parents*, it's particularly important to get your kids vaccinated *before* they become sexually active," said Dr. Cepín. "Talking with your kids about the HPV vaccine presents a great opportunity to talk with them about their sexual health. But, if you're not ready for that conversation, simply tell them it's a cancer-prevention vaccine."

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For Latinas, cost, lack of information, and limited access to contraceptives have been key barriers to their use. However, if women don't use contraception, they are very likely to have an unplanned pregnancy. In fact, 85% of women who don't use contraception will become pregnant within one year. But thanks to the ACA, many women can now choose from a variety of methods free-of-charge, including the IUD and implant, which are over 99% effective in preventing pregnancy.

"Access to safe and effective birth control methods is key to the advancement of women and girls. It allows them to plan their pregnancies and have children, if and when, they want to," said Jessica Maria Atrio, MD MSc FACOG, an obstetrician gynecologist at Montefiore and the Co-Director, Fellowship in Family Planning, Albert Einstein School of Medicine. "If you're not ready to be a mother, it's important to find a birth control method that's right for you," added Atrio.

To find a method that's right for them, women are encouraged to talk with their health care providers and visit free, online Spanish-language birth control sites, like [Bedsider](#).

Half of all sexually active Americans will get at least one STI by age 25. Most of these infections don't have any signs or symptoms, so without regular screening, people can unintentionally pass these infections onto their partners. And if left untreated, STIs can cause infertility, pelvic pain, and fetal illnesses, and increase the risk of contracting HIV. Although it is recommended that all adults be tested for HIV at least once, over 54% of Hispanics have never been screened. Testing is the gateway to care and treatment, allowing people with HIV to live long and healthy lives. Additionally, 63% of sexually active Latinas (ages 15-21) were not screened annually for chlamydia, the leading cause of preventable infertility.

"Anyone who has sex is at risk for STIs, regardless of who you are, where you come from, or how many partners you have had," said Kathleen Raquel Page, MD, Director, Centro SOL (Center for Salud/Health and Opportunity for Latinos), and Chief of Clinical Services, STD/HIV/HCV/TB services, Baltimore City Health Department. "Prevention and regular screening are key -- if detected early, many STIs can be easily cured with simple antibiotics, and others can be effectively managed with antiviral medications, before causing serious problems."

"Knowledge is power. It's important to take charge of your own sexual health, and get informed about the specific services that are recommended for you. Don't assume that you are automatically getting these services when you go to your provider. You need to ask to be sure," urged Dr. Page.

#### **About the National Coalition for Sexual Health**

The National Coalition for Sexual Health (NCSH) consists of 91 members, including leading national health, medical, and consumer organizations, working together to improve sexual health and well-being across the lifespan. For more information: <http://nationalcoalitionforsexualhealth.org/>.

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