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NEWS RELEASE

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GOVERNOR URGES LOCAL GROUPS TO APPLY FOR GRANTS FOR ABSTINENCE PROGRAMS

Gov. Christie Whitman announced today that local non-profit groups may apply for \$765,000 in federal funds earmarked for teaching young people the importance of abstaining from sexual activity and developing the skills needed to reject sexual advances.

"Community groups have a great opportunity to reach young people making important life decisions, such as whether or not to be sexually active, or to try alcohol or drugs," the Governor said. "Local organizations can play a vital role in helping teens and pre-teens learn why and how to resist some of the pressures they face."

"Our future depends on all of us being more personally responsible and personally invested in what goes on around us every day," said Gov. Whitman.

"We would especially like to see local groups develop programs that stress peer leadership, the process of young people teaching other young people," said Health and Senior Services Commissioner Len Fishman. "We know that young people will listen to what their peers have to say, even when they won't listen to adults."

According to Fishman, non-profit groups can apply to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services for grants to conduct programs for young persons ages 10 to 14. The Department has mailed application packets to more than 200 local organizations, including a number of groups that had already expressed interest in applying. Additional packets will be sent out as requested before the application deadline of March 25.

The Governor and Fishman made the announcement while visiting the Best Friends program in Newark. Based on a national model, the Newark program works with more than 300 young women, stressing abstinence from sexual activity and drugs. Elayne Bennett, president and founder of the national Best Friends program, joined the Governor and Fishman at the event.

"You have to take control of your life," Gov. Whitman told the group. "You have to accept responsibility for your actions. You have to be bigger and stronger than all those misleading messages you see and hear and read every day."

The Best Friends program offers a fun and supportive environment where young women are encouraged to be their best. Group discussions, talks by role models, and sessions with personal mentors are some of the activities designed to promote self-respect and good decision-making.

"We're very pleased that there's additional support available for programs that stress abstinence," said RoseMaria Peterkin, director of the Newark Best Friends program. "The adolescent years are difficult ones, but we've seen in our program that with the support of their peers and caring adults, young people are very capable of making positive decisions for the future."

The Department of Health and Human Services was notified last November that it would receive \$843,000 in available federal funds for abstinence programs, which included less than \$80,000 for administrative costs. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services allowed the state to emphasize certain elements of an educational program dealing with abstinence.

Fishman said New Jersey chose to focus on three areas: teaching the importance of abstinence, and the fact that it the only certain way to avoid pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases; teaching the importance of delaying sexual activity until becoming self-sufficient, and teaching skills for refusing sexual advances, including information on the role of alcohol and drugs play in increasing the vulnerability of young persons.

Non-profit groups are eligible to apply for the one-year grants. For every \$4 in grant money received, programs must supply \$3 in matching funds, which can come from in-kind contributions of staff time or other facility resources. Grant decisions will be made in early May and grant awards will take effect by July 1. The Department of Health and Senior Services expects to fund from 10 to 20 programs.

All grant applications will be reviewed by a committee composed of representatives from the Department of Health and Senior Services, other state agencies and community groups not applying for grants.

Organizations interested in applying for grants may call the Department of Health and Senior Services' Community Health Services program at 609 984-1384 to request an application packet.

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