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PLANNED PARENTHOOD IN L.A. NEWS

NEWS ARTICLE, "LATINO VOTES SEEN AS KEY TO PROP 85," WHICH APPEARED IN THE SACRAMENTO BEE ON OCTOBER 23, 2006

By Peter Hecht

LOS ANGELES -- Sister Rosa Gonzales says she can count on receptive audiences when she knocks on doors in Latino neighborhoods to urge a "yes" vote on Proposition 85, the parental notification initiative on abortion.

"When they see that nun's habit, they listen," she says.

The sight of Sister Rosa walking voter precincts near the Resurrection Church east of downtown Los Angeles is but one illustration of how the Catholic Church and Proposition 85 proponents are targeting a critical constituency: Latino voters.

The outreach in Latino communities -- by both anti-abortion and abortion rights forces -- reflects the competitive stakes of the parental notification initiative. The measure, a modified version of last year's Proposition 73, would require doctors to notify a parent or guardian before performing abortions on girls under 18.

Proposition 73 lost by 52.6 percent to 47.4 percent as voters were resoundingly rejecting Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's unrelated special election initiatives. So parental notification backers gathered signatures anew, hoping the initiative would fare better in a general election with a broader voter turnout.

While the parental notification initiative is strongly supported by anti-abortion Republican groups and widely opposed by Democratic leaders, the issue plays out differently among Latinos. Though predominantly Democratic, they are seen as a crucial vote because they are more likely to part with their party's abortion rights views.

At Our Lady Queen of Angels Church, a Los Angeles parish with a history of backing immigrant rights, the Sanctuary Movement sheltering 1980s war refugees from El Salvador and other liberal causes, the Rev. Steve Niskanen melds sermons favoring Proposition 85 with criticism of the Iraq war. "I mention 85 in the context of a wider net of pro-life issues, including opposition to war and euthanasia," Niskanen says.

Meanwhile, at Planned Parenthood offices in Pasadena, campaign volunteer Claudia Estrada Powell speaks in Spanish as she trains bilingual women and girls to walk Latino communities to tell parents to vote "no."

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Writing on a poster board, she reviews talking points, including warning parents that the notification requirement could imperil the safety of pregnant girls by causing them to delay medical care or counseling or forcing them to seek dangerous or illegal abortions.

"Instead of spending all this money on a campaign, they (initiative backers) should spend it on pregnancy education and prevention," Estrada Powell, who is Catholic, says in an interview.

Supporters emphasize family

Recently, Cardinal Roger Mahony taped an Oct. 1 sermon, urging voters throughout the heavily Latino Los Angeles archdiocese to approve the measure.

Churches are generally restricted under Internal Revenue Service rules from direct campaigning for or against political candidates. But the prohibitions don't apply to taking stands on issues, lobbying and distributing voter materials. So Latino parishes, including the 3,000-member Resurrection Church and the 10,000-member Our Lady Queen of Angels, hold Yes on 85 rallies or include Spanish-language fliers for the initiative in church bulletins. They attempt to persuade voters that it supports family unity.

"In the Hispanic community, family is primary," said Father Marcos Gonzales, associate pastor at the Holy Family Church in Glendale, a 5,000-member congregation that is one-third Latino. "Parents want to know what is going on in their children's lives. It's incomprehensible a child can undergo something so serious and they can be kept out of the loop."

In a campaign called "Protección y Seguridad" -- "Protection and Security" -- volunteers for the No on 85 camp canvass Latino neighborhoods to argue the initiative is a misguided attempt to legislate family communication and could subject girls in abusive homes to additional harm.

"Proposition 85 would endanger young Latinas who are afraid of talking to their parents," reads a Spanish-language "canvass script" prepared for No on 85 precinct workers.

Proposition 85 is largely bankrolled by James Holman, publisher of the San Diego Reader and a chain of Catholic newspapers. He has contributed more than \$2.6 million to Proposition 85 to date, after donating \$1.2 million to the unsuccessful Proposition 73 campaign.

Opponents, led by Planned Parenthood and affiliates, have raised more than \$3.8 million to oppose the measure and are expected to top the \$4.5 million raised against Proposition 73.

Proposition 85 backers, generally groups or individuals opposing abortion, say the measure attempts to address a fundamental issue of parental rights. They argue that a minor girl can get a surgical abortion or medication to terminate a pregnancy in secret but that consent of a parent or guardian is required for other non-emergency surgeries.

Initiative opponents, namely Planned Parenthood and other abortion rights advocates, say it could harm traumatized young girls -- including victims of sexual or family abuse. Though a teen could obtain permission from a juvenile court judge to avoid the notification requirement, opponents say she would be forced to navigate a confusing labyrinth of the legal system.

While similar to Proposition 73, Proposition 85 no longer includes controversial language calling abortion the "death of an unborn child" -- a definition proponents argued could have undermined legal abortion.

Abortion rights at risk, foes say

Margaret Crosby, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, maintains that Proposition 85 would still undermine an "explicit right to privacy" under the state constitution and result in "a major restriction on abortion rights for young women.

"The purpose of this is to discourage doctors from providing reproductive health care to California teenagers," Crosby said. "And there's a segment of society that wants to harass and discourage doctors from performing abortions."

Katie Short, a Ventura County lawyer who helped draft both Proposition 73 and Proposition 85, said the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld parental notification and consent laws as consistent with the high court's landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion.

She argues that 35 states now have parental involvement laws for abortion and says California joining the list won't roll back any legal rights.

"It's a scare tactic, clear and simple," Short says of the opponents' claim. "They want to turn this into a referendum on abortion -- and it's not."

Proposition 85 opponents say the state can't legislate "family communications." Proponents say when it comes to abortion, it is a necessary step.

Camille Pecha, a student at St. Francis High School in Sacramento who is volunteering at phone banks for the Yes on 85 campaign, said it is crucial that a doctor notify a parent about an abortion.

"From the perspective of a 15-year-old girl, if I was going through that situation, it would probably be one of the most stressful situations ever," she says. "... Kids are going to be afraid to talk to their parents if they fail a test or crash the car. But they (parents) really need to know."

Briana Castro, a 15-year-old student at South Pasadena High School, volunteered for the No on 85 campaign because she fears the initiative could force troubled girls to harm themselves or seek unsafe abortions.

"I'm concerned many teens will go to places where there's not a certified doctor," Castro says.

But before Castro signed up to walk Los Angeles-area Latino precincts to persuade voters to reject the measure, she talked with her mother.

"My mom told me I should go out and do this," she says.

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