

Morning-after pill vending machines gain popularity on college campuses post-Roe

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A vending machine is stocked with emergency contraceptives at Odegaard Library on the campus of the University of Washington, Friday, June 2, 2023, in Seattle. After a student-led campaign to install the emergency contraceptive vending machine on campus in November, boxes of generic Plan B have been available to students for \$12.60, a fraction of the cost charged in stores. Credit: Kevin Clark/The Seattle Times via AP

Need Plan B? Tap your credit card and enter B6.

Since last November, a library at the University of Washington has featured a different kind of vending machine, one that's become more popular on campuses around the country since the U.S. Supreme Court ended constitutional protections for abortion last year. It's stocked with ibuprofen, pregnancy tests and the morning-after pill.

With some states enacting abortion bans and others enshrining protections and expanding access to birth control, the machines are part of a push on college campuses to ensure emergency contraceptives are cheap, discreet and widely available.

There are now 39 universities in 17 states with emergency contraceptive vending machines, and at least 20 more considering them, according to the American Society for Emergency Contraception. Some, such as the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma, are in states where abortion is largely banned.

Over-the-counter purchase of Plan B and generic forms is legal in all 50 states.

The 2022 ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade* "is putting people's lives at stake, so it makes pregnancy prevention all the more urgent," said Kelly Cleland, the ASEC's executive director. "If you live in a state where you cannot get an abortion and you can't get an abortion anywhere near you, the stakes are so much higher than they've ever been before."

Washington this year became first U.S. state to set aside money—\$200,000 to fund \$10,000 grants that colleges can obtain next year through an application process—to expand access to emergency contraceptives at public universities and technical colleges through the automatic dispensers.

The University of Washington's machine was installed after a student-led campaign. It offers boxes of generic Plan B for \$12.60, about a quarter of what the name-brand versions sell for in stores, and more than 640 have been sold.

The drug is even cheaper in some machines than it is in UW's, as low as \$7 per box. That's because it is sold at just above wholesale cost, compared with pharmacy retail prices that might go up to \$50.

In Illinois and New York, lawmakers are developing legislation that would require at least one vending machine selling emergency contraceptives on state college campuses.

In Connecticut, Yale had to drop plans to install an emergency contraceptive vending machine in 2019 after learning it would violate state law.

But this year the state approved a measure allowing Plan B and other over-the-counter medications to be sold from vending machines on campuses and other locations.

The machines can't be placed in K-12 schools or exposed to the elements, and they must have temperature and humidity controls and include plans for power outages and expired items.

"This just enables people to have better access and easier access," said Rep. Nicole Klarides-Ditria, one of several Republicans in Connecticut's Democratic-controlled General Assembly who supported the measure. "You may need Plan B, as we all know, in the middle of the night, and you won't have access to a pharmacy until the morning."

Although the morning-after pill has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration for over-the-counter sale, many stores and

pharmacies keep it behind the counter or locked up, require identification for purchase and make the experience of purchasing it intimidating.

"There is a stigma associated with getting access to these medications," said Zoe Amaris, a University of Washington pharmacy student and board member of UW Pharmacists for Reproductive Education and Sexual Health. "Having a vending machine is so easy. You don't need to go to a pharmacy. You don't need to go through your health care provider."

Plan B is more effective the sooner it is taken, and vending machine access could be particularly crucial for victims of rape when pharmacies are closed. The anonymity the machines afford may also be important to some assault victims.

"When you have a vending machine, it takes away a lot of those barriers," Cleland said. "Students can go on their own terms to get it when they need it."

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