

## **Major Complaints Against Crisis Pregnancy Centers and Efforts to Protect Women**

Dawn Stacey M.Ed, LMHC

Typically, Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs) tend to be run by organizations that fund those billboards with slogans like: “Pregnant? Scared? We Can Help.” They may try to attract pregnant women who are at risk for abortion through advertisement and names that can give the impression that they are neutral healthcare providers. For example, they may use names like: Crisis Pregnancy Center, Pregnancy Counseling Center, Pregnancy Care Center, Pregnancy Aid, or Pregnancy Resource Center. Some CPCs do provide an open and honest atmosphere while offering neutral support and information to women facing unintended pregnancies. But there are also CPCs that operate with the objective of trying to prevent a woman from seeking an abortion, so women have reported feeling somewhat deceived by these Crisis Pregnancy Centers’ tactics and philosophy.

### **Major Complaints Against Crisis Pregnancy Centers:**

Many of these crisis pregnancy clinics have been found to falsely advertise that they offer abortion services or counseling. After being investigated, it has been found that these centers were created to try to discourage women from exercising their option to have an abortion. It can be tricky deciding which CPC to visit as there are pregnancy resource centers that do provide accurate and neutral information while others can be coercive and deceptively appeal to pregnant women through false advertisement or misleading names. Investigations have found that many of these CPCs may rely on scare tactics, dispense false information, and use emotional manipulation to convince women not to seek an abortions.

### **Reported Scare Tactics Used by Crisis Pregnancy Centers:**

Once a woman has been misled into a CPC, she may be subjected to a variety of coercive, emotional, and offensive tactics that are designed to convince her to not seek an abortion. The following are compiled examples of various people’s reported experiences while at a pregnancy resource center. Please note that these examples are typical of what one may expect and are, by far, **not** the exception:

- According to a 2002 report by the Center for Reproductive Rights, a woman at a pregnancy help center was told that she “had the devil inside her” and was then “bombarded with graphic images of disfigured babies and aborted fetuses.”
- Amy Sutnick, a Planned Parenthood employee visited one of the Manhattan Pregnancy Services center that advertised it offers "accurate abortion information." Ms. Sutnick reported that at all three of their centers, women were required to watch the slide show, “*Caring*,” while waiting for their pregnancy test results. The slide

show was filled of erroneous statistics about the dangers of abortion, all of which have been disputed by the Centers for Disease Control.

- Liz Nazario, a volunteer at a CPC, admits that in an attempt to shake the complacency of women seeking an abortion, she starts by showing black-and-white photos of the quickly developing fingers of a fetus; then, she would take out a big, color photo of a fetus with closed eyes and a smile. Finally she shows another full-page color picture of bloody fetuses in a trash bin. She further reveals that, she would sometimes take a pregnant woman into a tiny chapel to pray before a marble altar. She tells Alan Cooperman, of the *Washington Post*, that she always invites these women to watch a videotape on a big-screen TV. "I like to use 'Abortion Procedures.' It explains second and third trimester abortions," she explains (referring to relatively rare and traumatic procedures). "Some girls need 'Silent Scream.' 'Silent Scream' is softer. I like to go gradually." Nazario also shares, "A lot of times when a girl comes in and says she wants an abortion, she's just being selfish...She's really not thinking about the baby. She's thinking about herself."
- In Arizona, a father brought his 16-year-old daughter to a pregnancy resource center after she had been raped. The teenager was shown "brutal footage" including pictures of dismembered fetuses. The father reports that, "they just emotionally raped her. . . . They [the CPC] are advocates for the unborn, and to hell with the troubled person. They had an ax to grind, and just terrorized her."
- Nancy Weinstock, a NOW volunteer, visited the Options Pregnancy Resources Center, whose advertisement promises "birth control information." She was told that "birth control doesn't work because Mother Nature doesn't intend our bodies to be controlled." She was also informed that urine and blood pregnancy tests were "identical" and equally effective (information that is also false).
- Courtney Barbour, an administrative assistant at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, brought a pregnant urine sample with her to a nearby crisis pregnancy center, Birthchoice. Barbour explained that while waiting for the test results, the counselor showed her plastic fetuses at various stages of development and informed her that the fetus has a heartbeat immediately (which is not accurate). The counselor further asked about Barbour's religious convictions, to which Barbour responded, "Well, I don't go to church, but my grandfather was a Methodist minister." The counselor responded, "Well I bet that your grandfather really would like you to have this baby." Barbour then recounts that the woman (who had performed her pregnancy test) came back into the room and presented Barbour with a pair of soft blue, hand-knit booties and said, "Congratulations! You're a mother."
- In Minnesota, Robbinsdale Women's Center, an anti-abortion CPC is located across the street from the Robbinsdale Clinic, PA, which offers a range of medical care including abortion services. Several women who accidentally went to the center instead of the clinic complained that the center pressured and deceived them. One woman even filed a complaint with the Minnesota attorney general claiming, "In trying to find the Robbinsdale Clinic, I mistakenly went into the women's clinic across the street. When I told them my name and appointment, they had me take a

seat and had a counselor talk to me about anti-abortion. At which time I learned I didn't have an appointment there at all. They then said they did not know of the Robbinsdale Clinic."

- In an excerpt from the publication *Legal But Out of Reach*, a mother shares, while at a CPC, after asking what our decision will be, "my daughter and I said we decided the best thing for her to do was have an abortion and how much would that cost? The two ladies said 'please wait a minute' and left us...They came back with a doll and scissors and said 'this is what your baby looks like now and we want you to start cutting her up because that's what will happen if you get an abortion - so start cutting!'"

## **Investigation of Crisis Pregnancy Centers:**

**1. Crisis Pregnancy Centers: An Affront to Choice:** this report, put out by the National Abortion Federation details the deceptive and harmful practices of CPCs as well as all the legal action that has been taken against these centers. The report maintains that CPCs purposely market themselves in such a way to attract women looking for a full-service health clinic – only to find themselves “harassed, bullied and given blatantly false information.” Additionally, the report found that some pregnancy resource centers will focus on a women’s needs during her first two trimesters of pregnancy, yet will “abandon” her once she reaches the point in her pregnancy that abortion is no longer possible or difficult to obtain.

**2. Government Investigations:** Representative Henry Waxman (Chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform) released a study that found crisis pregnancy centers will often mislead and misinform teenagers about the medical risks of abortion. Investigators had callers pretending to be 17-year-old girls facing an unplanned pregnancy. The investigators revealed that 87% (20 of the 23) federally-funded centers called provided false or misleading information about the health risks associated with abortion; in fact, several center employees told the callers that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer (despite the overwhelming medical consensus that no such link exists). Additionally, callers were erroneously told that abortion could cause “permanent damage” that would affect their future ability to have children, and these centers continued to advance the myth of “post-abortion trauma syndrome,” by inflating the risk of depression and suicide following an abortion even though scientific evidence shows that abortion does not cause significant long-term psychological harm.

**3. NARAL Pro-Choice:** the NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina affiliate was concerned that there are almost 10 times as many crisis pregnancy centers in the state than abortion providers. In their investigation, they enlisted volunteers to call centers asking for medical information and asked them to record the responses. NARAL reported that one CPC counselor suggested that abortion often breaks up relationships by telling a caller, “9 out of 10 couples go through an abortion split up.” In the attempt to promote abstinence, another counselor told a caller that “all condoms are defective and have slots and holes in them.” Executive Director of NARAL NC, Melissa Reed, explains that these centers, “talk about the joys of childbirth, which can certainly be a joy, but they make a woman

feel very intimidated about making any other choice in her life [other than maintaining the pregnancy].”

### **Efforts to Protect Women:**

There have been efforts made to help protect women, who may already be feeling overwhelmed by an unplanned pregnancy, from the potential negative emotional impact that various CPCs could cause due to the deception in their advertising and for providing misleading information. Given the level of deception inherent with their advertising and the negative emotional impact they have (and continue to) cause to women who are already feeling overwhelmed by an unplanned pregnancy, efforts have been made by legislators with the objective of protecting women.

- In 2006, Representative Carolyn Maloney introduced the *Stop Deceptive Advertising for Women’s Services Act* (H.R.5052). This legislation would grant the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) the authority to protect women from crisis pregnancy centers that use deceptive practices and mislead women into believing that they offer comprehensive reproductive health-care. The FTC would also have the power to enforce violations of their rules put forth to prevent unfair or deceptive practices on the part of crisis pregnancy center. To date, 46 members of Congress have cosponsored this legislation. Currently, the bill has been referred to the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection.
- Some crisis pregnancy centers have been sued based on various legal causes of action. Attorneys have successfully challenged CPCs' use of public funds under the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. Additionally, plaintiffs have also been successful in requiring crisis pregnancy centers to change some of their deceptive advertising tactics in states such as New York, California, Ohio, Missouri, and North Dakota.
- In 1994, a California trial court prohibited San Diego Pregnancy Services from advertising itself as a medical facility that provides pregnancy testing services or abortion counseling. The CPC was also prohibited from listing itself in phone directories under "abortion service providers" or "family planning information." The court also ruled that the center must tell women that it does not perform abortions, provide abortion referrals, dispense birth control, or provide written pregnancy verifications. It was also mandated that this CPC inform women that its volunteers counsel from a Biblical, "anti-abortion perspective."
- State attorney generals have also initiated legal action. For example, New York Attorney General, Eliot Spitzer, reached a in 2002 with some pregnancy resource centers requiring that these clinics clearly make it known that they do not provide or make referrals for abortion or birth control. These clinics must also reveal that it is not a licensed medical provider qualified to diagnose or accurately date pregnancy, both verbally and in writing, before providing a pregnancy test and/or pregnancy counseling as well as inform the woman that only a licensed health-care provider can confirm a pregnancy and provide medical advice about pregnancy. The settlement

also requires CPCs to tell people who call or visit the center that it is not a medical facility.

- In 1993, Ohio Attorney General Lee Fisher was the first to charge CPCs with false advertising by identifying five centers that called themselves medical clinics, stating these centers "violate the law by advertising themselves as clinics when they are not medical facilities, provide no medical services, and have no doctors on staff. Some of the centers also promise additional services they do not provide, such as offering free pregnancy tests, when the center does not perform or interpret pregnancy tests for clients."

Many concerned activists, in addition to legal challenges, are also working to make sure that any CPCs that receive state or federal funds be required to provide women with accurate abortion information.

### **What You Can Do:**

You can help stop this deception by fighting bills or initiatives that fund crisis pregnancy centers by providing testimony about their danger and/or unconstitutionality. Contact your elected officials and make sure to support affirmative bills that are based on medically accurate information and serve to keep abortion safe, legal, and accessible. According to Priscilla Smith, acting director of the Center for Reproductive Rights' domestic program, "The fact that federal, state and local governments are subsidizing the anti-abortion agenda of crisis pregnancy centers sets a terrible precedent for women. The government needs to get out of the business of sponsoring groups that mislead and lie to women about their reproductive choices."

If you have had a personal, negative experience with a crisis pregnancy center, report and document your encounter; contact the National Abortion Federation's Patient Partnership and share your story as these accounts of actual encounters help tell the truth about pregnancy resource centers.

Check your local Yellow Pages to see if the pregnancy resource centers in your town are involved with false or deceptive advertising (such as listing themselves under abortion services or abortion). If you find that they are using false advertising tactics, inform the Yellow Pages, the Better Business Bureau, and/or other local organizations supporting the crisis pregnancy centers and request a change in listing.

Be mindful if you live in a state that has adopted "Choose Life" scheme. One of the most successful fundraising activities for crisis pregnancy centers is the "Choose Life" license plate program. The proceeds from the sale of these license plates are distributed to CPCs across the state. Plus, the "Choose Life" scheme prohibits funds raised by the program from being distributed to groups that provide or counsel for abortion services.

According to Choose Life, Inc., Florida is currently communicating with groups and individuals in over 46 states in assisting them with their Choose Life license plate process. These license plates are currently available in six states: Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland,

Mississippi, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee. The total sales for all states Choose Life license plates (as of 10/31/07) was \$8,196,606.

Additionally, Choose Life, Inc. reports that Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington are states where efforts are underway for the adoption of Choose Life Plates (some states are just waiting for legislative approval while others are currently in the process of ongoing lawsuits).

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Used in this article as well as general sources attesting to the truth about crisis pregnancy centers.

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