



NARAL
Pro-Choice America Foundation

The Truth About Crisis Pregnancy Centers

Anyone seeking health-care services should receive comprehensive, unbiased, medically and factually accurate information. Women facing unintended pregnancy deserve no less. When women are fully informed, they are better able to make responsible and appropriate decisions about their reproductive health. Mindful of this, the anti-choice movement has for years tried to restrict, control, and manipulate the information doctors give women facing unplanned pregnancies. Unable to shut down legitimate public-health clinics, their most recent strategy is instead to build a network across the country of anti-choice, unlicensed organizations posing as comprehensive health care clinics – so-called “crisis pregnancy centers” (CPCs).

While some CPCs may provide appropriate support and information to women facing unintended pregnancies, many do not. Unfortunately, reports indicate that many CPCs intentionally misinform and mislead women seeking pregnancy-related information with the intention of dissuading them from exercising their right to choose.¹ In fact, some CPCs may force women seeking objective health-care information to watch anti-abortion films, slide shows, photographs, and hear lectures. Some may also refuse to provide information about or referrals for birth control.² These practices block women from making fully informed choices about their reproductive health and may endanger women’s health by delaying access to legitimate health-care services.

Crisis Pregnancy Centers Use Misleading Tactics to Entice Women

CPCs often mislead women into believing that they provide a full range of reproductive-health services. They do so by using questionable advertising tactics and providing dishonest or evasive answers when women call to inquire about their services.

- CPCs may list themselves in phonebooks under the headings “abortion,” “abortion alternatives,” “abortion services,” “family-planning information centers” or “women’s organizations” even though the only “abortion service” they provide is anti-abortion coercion.³
- CPCs may also choose names similar to those of legitimate reproductive-health clinics that provide abortion services and locate themselves near those clinics to confuse women and lure them into their center.
 - For example, in Minnesota, Robbinsdale Women’s Center, an anti-abortion pregnancy center that counsels women against abortion is

located across the street from the Robbinsdale Clinic, PA, which offers a range of medical care from licensed medical providers, including abortion services. According to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, several women who accidentally went to the center instead of the clinic complained that the center tried to deceive them. One woman even filed a complaint with the Minnesota attorney general: "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 facility that provided abortions]..."⁴

- While CPCs may falsely suggest that they provide a full range of reproductive-health services, they clearly do not. Some centers do not have any medically trained or medically supervised personnel on staff at all.⁵ Even in the cases of centers that are overseen by medical professionals, there are no regulations in place to ensure that women will receive medically accurate information and services that meet an appropriate standard of care with respect to all of the women's reproductive-health options.
 - In July 2006, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) released a study which found that crisis pregnancy centers often mislead and misinform teenagers about the medical risks of abortion. Investigators posing as pregnant 17-year olds seeking medical counseling called more than two dozen CPCs that receive federal funding. The report found that 87 percent of these CPCs provided either false or misleading information about the health effects of abortion. Specifically, several center employees told the women that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer, despite the overwhelming medical consensus that no such link exists. In addition, callers were incorrectly told that abortion could cause "permanent damage" that would affect their future ability to bear children. Finally, many centers continued to advance the myth of "post-abortion syndrome," even though scientific evidence shows that abortion does not cause significant long-term psychological harm.⁶
- Misled by CPC ads, some women call to inquire about available services and prices. When presented with such inquiries, the staff at CPCs may evade the question or lie outright in order to attract the woman into the center.
 - In 2002, a University of Maryland student posed as a woman worried that she was pregnant. She called a crisis pregnancy center and made

an appointment at the center's office. During the call, she asked "if they knew anything about abortion." She said that they "blew [the question] off. They just said, 'Come in and we'll figure it out.'" Once at the clinic, the student mentioned that she might want to consider abortion care. At that point, a woman at the clinic said "Oh, you don't want to do that. You'll mess up your body." The student indicated that the woman at the clinic was "really trying to scare me into not having [an abortion] as an option."⁷

- In some cases, CPCs' deceitful or misleading practices have been so outrageous that courts and government agencies have intervened on the public's behalf.
 - In 2002, then-New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer issued subpoenas to a number of CPCs based on concerns that their advertising and business practices could lead women to believe that the centers provided medical services—including professional pregnancy testing— or that they provided abortion services or referrals.⁸ Spitzer eventually reached an agreement with one of the CPCs requiring it to: (1) tell people who call or visit the center that the center is not a medical facility; (2) clarify in advertising and consumer contacts that the pregnancy tests the CPC provides are self-administered or over-the-counter tests; (3) disclose orally and in writing—before providing a pregnancy test or counseling about pregnancy—that the center is not a licensed medical provider qualified to diagnose or accurately date pregnancy; and (4) clearly inform people who inquire about abortion care or birth control that it does not provide those services or make referrals for them.⁹
 - In June, 2004, the Center for Reproductive Rights filed suit against a Louisiana resident on behalf of three women, a medical facility, one of its physicians, and his patients, alleging that the CPC used false advertising, trademark infringement, fraud, and various forms of criminal and emotional manipulation to intentionally interfere with women's constitutional right to choose.¹⁰ According to the Center, the defendant lured women to him by "co-opting the name of a well-known medical provider," and by falsely advertising that he provided abortion referral services. The Center also alleged that, rather than providing these services, the defendant promised to connect women with doctors in private practice for a bargain, then claimed to set up appointments and repeatedly "re-scheduled" them. During this time, he discussed the women's medical conditions with them, wrongly advising them that the longer they waited for abortion care, the less risk there would be to their health, with the intention of preventing women from having an abortion

while the procedure is legal.¹¹

- In August, 2004, a federal district court issued a preliminary injunction preventing this defendant from using the name of the medical provider or any other name that would be confusingly similar, including renewing or initiating yellow pages or other directory assistance listings. The injunction also required that the defendant refrain from holding himself out as a provider of medical services, promising to make referrals for abortion care or offering financial assistance for those services, in advertising, orally, or otherwise.¹²

Women Suffer Intimidation, Anti-Choice Propaganda, and Misinformation at some Crisis Pregnancy Centers

Once women are enticed into crisis pregnancy centers, they may be subjected to a variety of coercive and offensive tactics intended to prevent them from exercising their right to choose.

- Women may be forced to watch shocking films, slide shows or pictures, designed to scare vulnerable women into carrying pregnancies to term.
 - One volunteer at a crisis pregnancy clinic states that to shake the complacency of women seeking abortion care, she pulls out a big, color photo of a fetus with closed eyes and a smile. She then flips to another full-page color picture: fetuses in a trash bin. Sometimes she takes [the pregnant women] into a tiny chapel to pray before a marble altar.¹³
 - An Arizona man unwittingly took his 16-year-old daughter to a CPC after she had been raped. After being shown “brutal footage” including pictures of dismembered fetuses, the man claimed that, “they just emotionally raped her. . . . They are advocates for the unborn, and to hell with the troubled person. They had an ax to grind, and just terrorized her.”¹⁴
 - 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.”¹⁵
- In an effort to scare women away from considering abortion care, some CPCs provide false propaganda about the “consequences” of abortion - including false claims that abortion causes breast cancer, sterility, and psychological damage.¹⁶

- Women may be subjected to other kinds of manipulative anti-abortion counseling designed to coerce them out of making an informed choice. A woman recently testified before Minnesota state senators that when she went to a pregnancy center in Minneapolis, “a counselor asked me why on Earth I wouldn’t have this baby as if keeping the baby was a consequence for my ‘irresponsible’ behavior. She made it seem as if having this baby was the only way for me to rectify a bad situation.” CPCs may also distribute information that tells women that they “risk their spiritual health by having abortions.”¹⁷

Recently, these centers have been trying to further their anti-choice persuasion efforts by seeking—and often receiving—state or federal funding. Funding may come in the form of direct allocations or tax credits in state budgets, through the establishment of “choose life” license plates (the revenues of which are used to fund CPCs), the donation of special equipment, or even through federal “abstinence-only” programs.

Efforts have been made by pro-choice legislators to stop fake clinics from falsely advertising that they offer abortion services or medical care, when in fact they are centers created to dissuade women from exercising their right to choose. In 2006, Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) 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 sanction crisis pregnancy centers that use deceptive advertising practices to mislead women into believing they offer comprehensive reproductive-health care. The FTC would have the power to enforce violations of their rules put forth to prevent unfair or deceptive practices on the part of CPCs. To date, 29 members of Congress have cosponsored the legislation.¹⁸ In addition to federal legislation, efforts are also being made at the state level to regulate CPCs. In 2007, nine bills aimed at regulating CPCs were introduced in four states (NY, OR, TX & WV).¹⁹

Crisis pregnancy centers continue their campaign to misinform women about abortion and to dissuade women from exercising their right to choose. While there are centers that do not deceive women or attempt to coerce them into making choices against their will, many CPCs continue to use deceptive and intimidating practices in order to prevent women from accessing the full range of reproductive-health options. Women are entitled to accurate, comprehensive and unbiased medical information with which they can make their own decisions. The government should support legitimate, comprehensive reproductive-health clinics, rather than centers whose goals are to prevent women from exercising their constitutionally protected right to choose.

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Notes:

¹ United States House of Representatives Committee On Government Reform, *False and Misleading Health Information Provided by Federally Funded Pregnancy Resource Centers* (2006), at <http://reform.democrats.house.gov/Documents/20060717101140-30092.pdf> (last visited November 17, 2008).

² Planned Parenthood of America, Inc. (PPFA), *Anti-Abortion Counseling Centers: A Consumer's Alert to Deception, Harassment, and Medical Malpractice* (2002), at <http://www.ppfa.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/abortion/fact-antiabortion-centers.xml> (last visited April 25, 2005).

³ Planned Parenthood of America, Inc. (PPFA), *Anti-Abortion Counseling Centers: A Consumer's Alert to Deception, Harassment, and Medical Malpractice* (2002), at <http://www.ppfa.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/abortion/fact-antiabortion-centers.xml> (last visited April 25, 2005).

⁴ Rachel E. Stassen-Berger, *More Than a Street Divides Clinic, Center*, ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS, Apr. 10, 2005.

⁵ Planned Parenthood of America, Inc. (PPFA), *Anti-Abortion Counseling Centers: A Consumer's Alert to Deception, Harassment, and Medical Malpractice* (2002), at <http://www.ppfa.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/abortion/fact-antiabortion-centers.xml> (last visited April 25, 2005).

⁶ United States House of Representatives Committee On Government Reform, *False and Misleading Health Information Provided by Federally Funded Pregnancy Resource Centers* (2006), at <http://reform.democrats.house.gov/Documents/20060717101140-30092.pdf> (last visited July 28, 2006).

⁷ Kate Shatzkin, *Inquiry Sought for Pregnancy Crisis Sites. Group Claims Counsel Offered at Centers Based on Opposition to Abortion*, BALTIMORE SUN, Aug. 17, 2002.

⁸ Press Release, Office of New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, *Spitzer Reaches Agreement with Upstate Crisis Pregnancy Center* (February 28, 2002), at http://www.oag.state.ny.us/press/2002/feb/feb28c_02.html (last visited on April 27, 2005).

⁹ Press Release, Office of New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, *Spitzer Reaches Agreement with Upstate Crisis Pregnancy Center* (February 28, 2002), at http://www.oag.state.ny.us/press/2002/feb/feb28c_02.html (last visited on April 27, 2005).

¹⁰ Center for Reproductive Rights, *Louisiana Man Sued for Faking Abortion Services*, June 7, 2004, at http://www.reproductiverights.org/pr_04_0607fakeclinic.html.

¹¹ Center for Reproductive Rights, *Louisiana Man Sued for Faking Abortion Services*, June 7, 2004, at http://www.reproductiverights.org/pr_04_0607fakeclinic.html.

¹² *Choice Inc. of Texas v. Graham*, No. 04-1581 (E.D.La. Aug. 4, 2004)(preliminary injunction issued).

¹³ Alan Cooperman, *Abortion Battle: Prenatal Care or Pressure Tactics?*, WASH. POST, February 21, 2002, at A01.

¹⁴ Martin Van Der Werf, *Some Abortion Centers Bogus Counseling is 'One-Sided,' Panel Told*, ARIZ. REPUBLIC, Sept. 21, 1991, at A1.

¹⁵ Center for Reproductive Rights, *Crisis Pregnancy Centers Seek Public Funds and Legitimacy*, 11 REPROD. FREEDOM NEWS, July/Aug. 2002, at 3.

¹⁶ Center for Reproductive Rights, *Crisis Pregnancy Centers Seek Public Funds and Legitimacy*, 11 REPROD. FREEDOM NEWS, July/Aug. 2002, at 4.

¹⁷ *Pregnancy centers' hope for \$2.5 million in state funds*, ASSOC. PRESS, Apr. 10, 2005.

¹⁸ H.R.5052, 109th Cong., 1st Sess. (2006).

¹⁹ A.B.6591, 2007 Leg., 230th session, (NY 2007); S.B.776, 2007 Leg., 74th session, (OR 2007); H.B. 2036, 2007 Leg., 80th session, (TX 2007); H.B.2142, 2007 Leg., 80th session, (TX 2007); H.B.2223, 2007 Leg., 80th session, (TX 2007); H.B.2878, 2007 Leg., 80th session, (TX 2007); S.B.1174, 2007 Leg., 80th session, (TX 2007); H.B.2249, 2007 Leg., 77th session, (WV 2007); H.B.2312, 2007 Leg., 77th session, (WV 2007).