



**Testimony for Public Hearing
Committee on Public Health
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HB 5416 An Act Concerning Deceptive Practices of Limited Services Pregnancy Centers.

Representative Steinberg, Senator Gerratana, Senator Somers, and distinguished members of the Committee on Public Health, My name is Sarah Croucher and I am the Executive Director of NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut. I am here to testify in strong support of H.B. 5416 An Act Concerning Deceptive Advertising Practices of Limited Services Pregnancy Centers.

NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut has been at the forefront of researching and documenting the practices of these fake women's health centers for over five years. In 2015 we published a landmark report, *The Right to Lie*, which included 22 undercover visits to these centers. Last year we supported the passage of a city ordinance in Hartford, limiting the deceptive practices of these centers. Our work in Hartford included significant documentation of the harm done by these centers, and their attempts to "lure" women who were seeking legitimate healthcare into one of their facilities, St. Gerard's Center for Life, located next to a licensed healthcare facility, Hartford GYN Center. This week, we also released an updated report on crisis pregnancy centers, showing that, although their practices are varied, they continue to deceive women across our state who are seeking abortion care.

It is untenable that women who are trying to exercise their constitutional right to access abortion care, supported in our state statutes, should face deceptive advertising and practices intended to block them from getting an abortion. This proposed legislation, H.B. 5416, is extremely limited in scope. It does nothing in regard to the day-to-day operations of these fake women's health centers. Instead, it simply prevents practices that are deliberately deceptive to women who think or know that they want an abortion and are looking for a licensed healthcare provider. When people look for healthcare and see somewhere that offers medical services and looks like a healthcare provider, they expect that they are going to get unbiased medical advice. When an organization has a mission to stop a certain practice, most people would agree that it is deceptive to be advertising to people as if you offer that same service. As an organization, we think that it is vital that the Committee on Public Health take action so that people who are seeking time-sensitive healthcare are not blocked from the services that they are actually looking for.

National Networks Opposed to Abortion

Connecticut is not alone in facing the threat of these fake women's health centers, often known as crisis pregnancy centers. The majority of the centers in Connecticut are affiliated with, or run by, national organizations, specifically Care Net, Birthright International, and Heartbeat International. Nationwide there are over 2,500 centers operating independently, or affiliated to, or run by, a larger national organization.¹



These organizations are clear about their mission to be opposed to abortion and birth control. Heartbeat International, for instance, has a “life-saving vision,” to, “make abortion unwanted today and unthinkable for future generations.”ⁱⁱ The organization originally began with the name “Alternatives to Abortion,” and states that it shares with Care Net the mission of establishing centers to “rescue the innocent.” They also state that “Heartbeat International does not promote birth control (devices or medications) for family planning, population control, or health issues, including disease prevention. All Heartbeat International policies and materials are consistent with Biblical principles and with orthodox Christian (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox) ethical principles and teaching on the dignity of the human person and sanctity of human life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Care Net similarly “works to end abortion” through affiliate pregnancy centers that “save lives every single day.”^{iv} Their mission is to acknowledge that “every human life begins at conception and is worthy of protection, Care Net offers compassion, hope, and help to anyone considering abortion by presenting them with realistic alternatives and Christ-centered support through our life-affirming network of pregnancy centers, organizations, and individuals.”^v A recent slide on their homepage (see below) illustrates their clear mission of working to persuade people from seeking abortion.

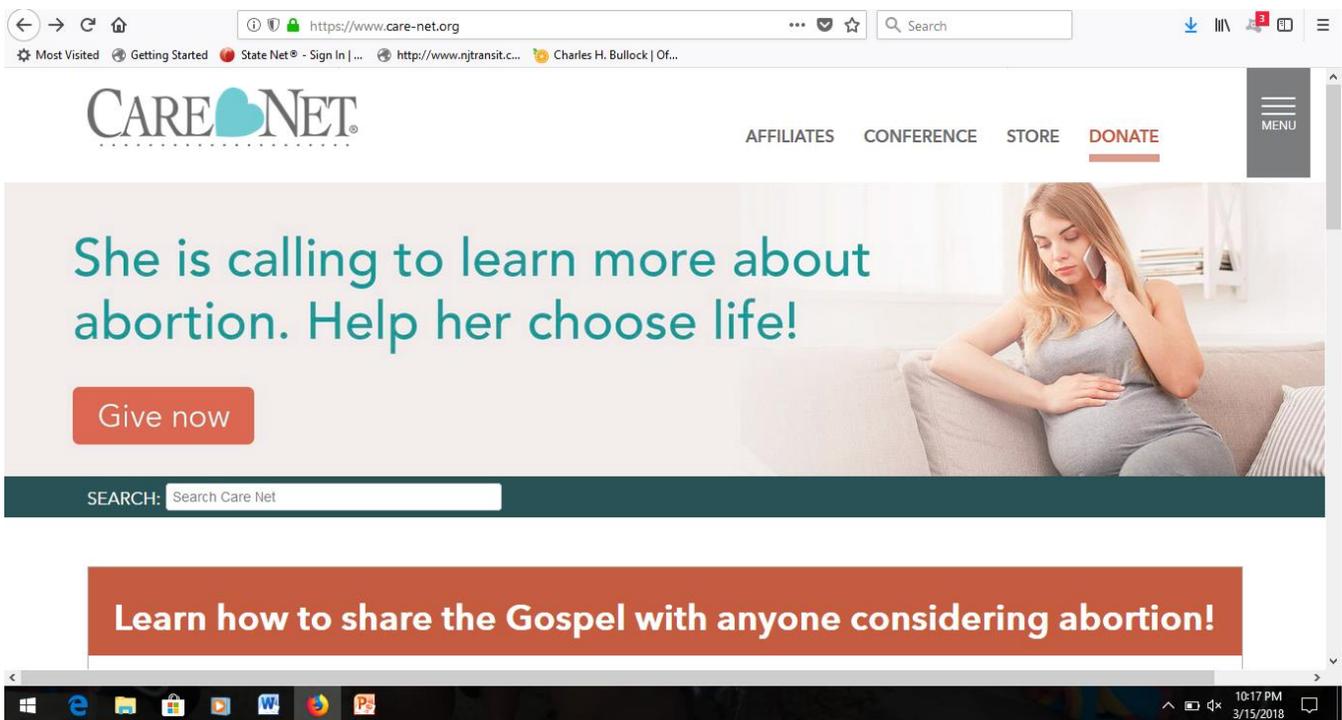


Figure 1: Care Net Homepage

These organizations have every right to exist and to have missions that are anti-abortion and opposed to birth control. However, our argument for the Committee on Public Health is that these organizations, or independent state affiliates of these organizations, should not be able to advertise to people who are seeking the very services to which they are opposed.

Deceptive Online Advertisements of Limited Services Pregnancy Centers in Connecticut

The manner of advertising and websites of these limited services pregnancy centers varies statewide. For instance, “Crisis Pregnancy Center of CT,” one of the centers in the Connecticut Pregnancy Care Coalition^{vi} states as the first sentence on their homepage “The Crisis Pregnancy Center is a Christian Pro-life Center that assists women to make life-affirming decisions by helping them to make plans to keep and parent their babies, or to make an adoption plan by providing them with compassionate and loving emotional, physical and spiritual support.”^{vii} Slightly less clear, but still easily visible disclaimers that an organization does not provide or refer for abortion are also visible on the homepages of some other limited services pregnancy centers. When one of these organizations is advertising in a manner that is not intended to deceive, it is clear to individuals seeking healthcare that they will not receive the services they are looking for at such a center.

Our concern is with the type of centers who have websites and other materials that are intended to deliberately deceive women who are intentionally seeking unbiased medical advice or care in relation to abortion. Testimony from medical providers clearly demonstrates that delaying tactics, which begin with misleading advertisements, present a real harm to women in our state, and at least sometimes prevent individuals from accessing an abortion that they very clearly want. In this testimony I would like to highlight three clear examples of misleading practices.

- 1) Hopeline Pregnancy Resource Center, operating three locations in Bridgeport, Stamford, and Danbury.

The homepage and other web pages of Hopeline do not make clear that they are opposed to abortion. Under “Our Services” information on their homepage, they offer “Pregnancy Testing,” “Ultrasounds,” and “Abortion Info.”^{viii} Under a “Your Options” dropdown menu on the homepage, abortion is listed as the first option, along with adoption and parenting. Upon clicking through to the abortion page, the reader is told; “Thinking About Abortion? If you recently found you are pregnant, you may be exploring your options, including abortion. Prior to making a decision, however, it is recommended that you take the time to gather information about the different types of procedures, as well as any associated risks. Hopeline PRC can help you work through your options, and provide resources so you can make an informed decision about the next step(s) of your pregnancy.”^{ix}

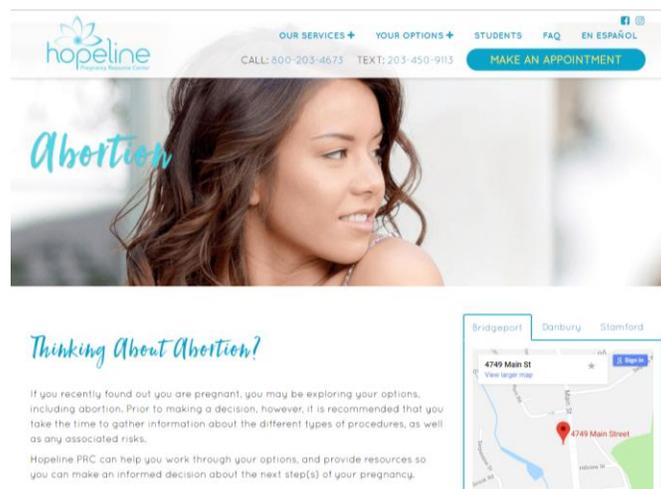


Figure 2: Hopeline Pregnancy Resource Center, “Thinking About Abortion?”



Despite providing the veneer of an organization that is the best and first step for someone seeking an abortion, only on one page, buried at the bottom, does Hopeline’s website mention that they do not provide or refer for abortion.

2) ABC Women’s Center, Middletown

Similar to Hopeline Pregnancy Resource Center, ABC Women’s Center has a homepage and website that generally leads someone seeking an abortion think that they offer help. Their homepage offers pregnancy testing, options consultation, and parenting support. Under “Pregnancy Services,” an option is offered for “Abortion Education.”^x This page begins with the offer that, “If you are considering having an abortion, our staff is here to provide you with the information you need before you make a decision.”^{xi} Only under the “About Us” and “FAQs,” neither of which are prominently displayed on the homepage of the website, can someone discover that ABC Women’s Center is a faith-based organization that does not provide or refer for abortions.

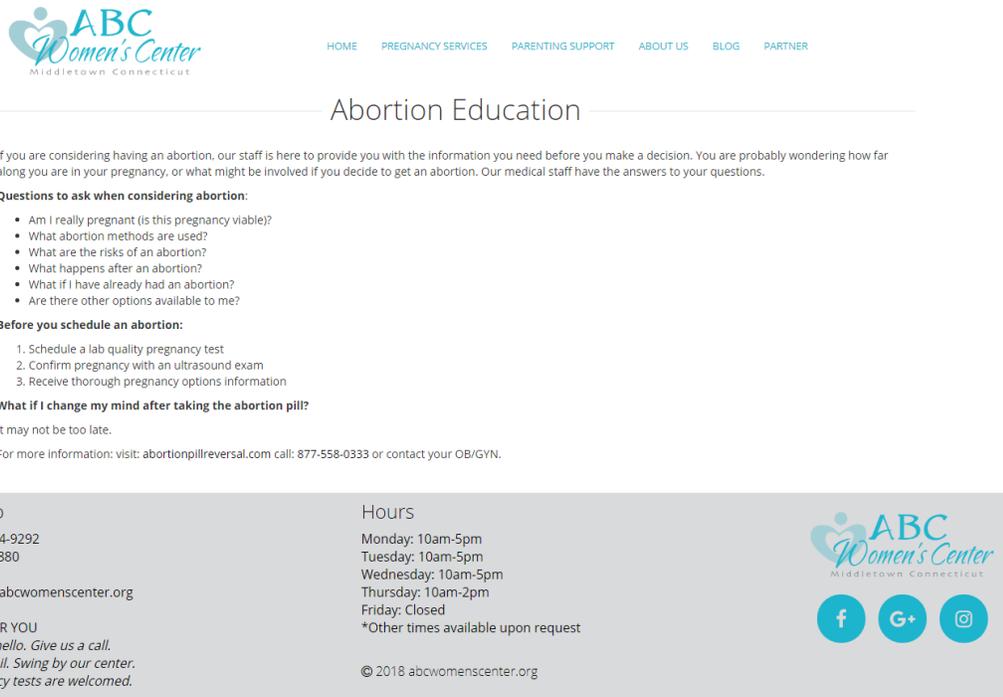


Figure 3: ABC Women’s Center “Abortion Education.”

3) Care Net of Southeastern CT, New London.

As with other misleading websites, Care Net of Southeastern CT seems to someone who is pregnant and seeking an abortion to be a helpful organization. Their homepage begins, “Pregnant? Care Net is your first step.”^{xii} On the homepage there is a tab that says “Considering Abortion?” Clicking through produces a page that states, “Care Net is your first step. Before an abortion, a pregnancy evaluation is standard care for any woman considering her next steps.” The entire page suggests that an individual seeking an abortion should make an appointment with Care Net of Southeastern CT. Nowhere on the page titled “Considering Abortion?” does it make clear that Care Net not only does not refer for abortions, but is actively opposed to abortion.^{xiii} Only buried in a page under “commonly asked questions” is there a mention that Care Net of Southeastern CT does not provide or refer for abortion,

and then continues on with the caveat, “We can, however, provide you with a lot of information to consider before proceeding with the procedure. . . . Definitely call or visit us before you schedule your procedure – there are a lot of things that you deserve to know before making such an important decision.”^{xiv}

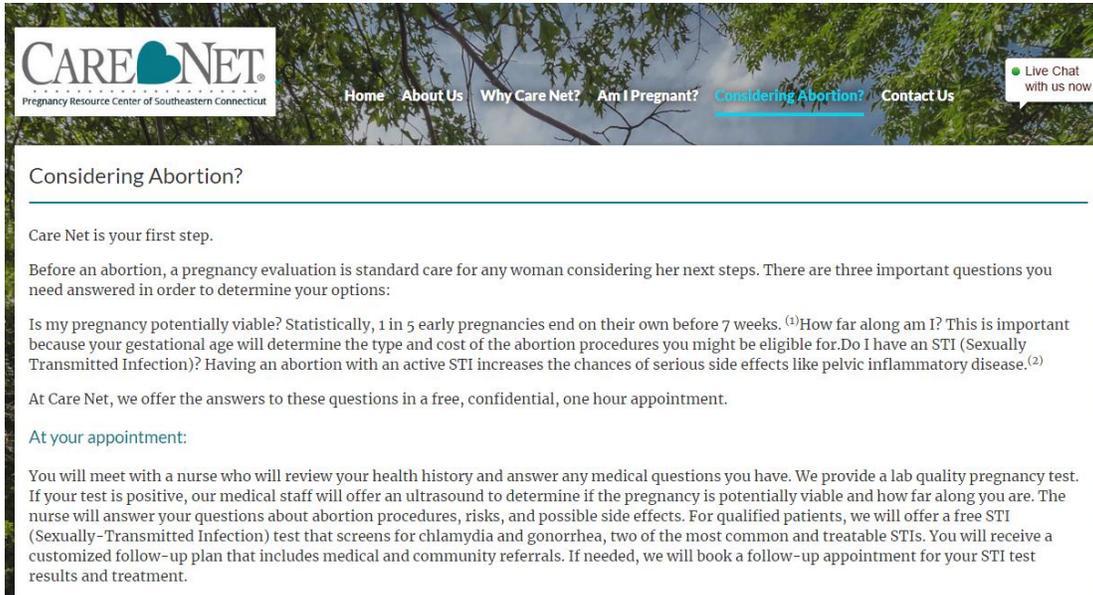


Figure 4: Care Net of Southeastern CT, “Considering Abortion?”

These practices are often amplified by the use of Google maps, or other online searches that use terms individuals may use when seeking an abortion to link to limited services pregnancy centers. This type of keyword-linked advertising further exacerbates the deceptive practices when individuals are seeking time-sensitive abortion care and are led to websites intended to mislead in order to delay access to healthcare.

Given the prevalence of attempts by limited service pregnancy centers in Connecticut to advertise in ways that are specifically intended to deceive individuals in our state and to thereby cause delays in access to healthcare, NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut urges members of the Committee on Public Health to take action and support H.B. 5416.

ⁱ Kashef, Ziba. 2003. The Fetal Position: Federal and state dollars are subsidizing a boom in antiabortion ‘crisis pregnancy centers.’ *Mother Jones*. Accessed at: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2003/01/fetal-position/>

ⁱⁱ Heartbeat International. 2018. Our Passion. <https://www.heartbeatinternational.org/about/our-passion> Accessed March 19, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heartbeat International. 2018. Frequently Asked Questions. <https://www.heartbeatinternational.org/about-us/faqs#hbi> Accessed March 19, 2018.

^{iv} Care Net. 2018. History. <https://www.care-net.org/history> Accessed March 19, 2018.

^v Care Net. 2018. Mission and Vision. <https://www.care-net.org/mission-and-vision> Accessed March 19, 2018.

^{vi} Connecticut Pregnancy Care Coalition. February 2018. Press Packet. Unpublished material distributed at press conference, February 14, 2018.

^{vii} Crisis Pregnancy Center of CT. 2018. Home. <https://thecrisispregnancycenterct.org/> Accessed March 19, 2018.

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- viii Hopeline Pregnancy Resource Center. 2018. Hopeline Pregnancy Resource Center. <http://hopelineprc.org/> Accessed March 19, 2018.
- ix Hopeline Pregnancy Resource Center. 2018. Abortion. <http://hopelineprc.org/options/abortion/> Accessed March 19, 2018.
- x ABC Women's Center. 2018. Pregnancy Services. <http://abcwomenscenter.org/pregnancy-services/> Accessed March 19, 2018.
- xi ABC Women's Center. 2018. Abortion Education. <http://abcwomenscenter.org/pregnancy-services/abortion-education/> Accessed March 19, 2018.
- xii Care Net of Southeastern CT. 2018. Care Net of Southeastern CT. <http://www.caretsect.org/> Accessed March 19, 2018.
- xiii Care Net of Southeastern CT. 2018. Considering Abortion? <http://www.caretsect.org/considering-abortion> Accessed March 19, 2018.
- xiv Care Net of Southeastern CT. 2018. About Us. <http://www.caretsect.org/about-us> Accessed March 19, 2018.