



**Testimony for Public Hearing
Committee on Public Health
March 20, 2018**

**Erica Crowley, MSW
Organizer & Volunteer Coordinator
NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut
1 Main Street, Suite T4
Hartford, CT 06106**

**HB 5416 AN ACT CONCERNING DECEPTIVE PRACTICES OF LIMITED SERVICES
PREGNANCY CENTERS**

Representative Steinberg, Senator Gerratana, Senator Somers, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee,

My name is Erica Crowley and I am the Organizer & Volunteer Coordinator for NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut. I testify in strong support of H.B. 5416, An Act Concerning Deceptive Advertising Practices of Limited Services Pregnancy Centers. At NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut I organize to ensure that every person can decide if, how, and when to have a family. Over the past year, I have overseen a volunteer program to study the practices of limited services pregnancy centers in Connecticut. Building on a series of 22 in-person investigations from 2015 and completing an additional 5 visits in 2017, our staff and volunteer team studied the practices of these pregnancy centers through website analyses, phone surveys, and in-person visits. Additionally, I documented specific cases of deception with medical providers and their patients who had been deceived, misled, and delayed by the practices of limited services pregnancy centers in the state.

From the research conducted, it is clear that there are a wide range of practices by pregnancy centers in our state. Since the release of NARAL's original report on crisis pregnancy centers in 2015, it is clear that in 2017 some pregnancy centers are now forthright about their anti-abortion stance and the services truly available at their centers. Clearly, public pressure has had an influence on some of these centers to be truthful in advertising. Unfortunately, however, it is documented that other crisis pregnancy centers are intentionally confusing and deceptive about what they offer and we have documented with patients and doctors the harm that has resulted from this deception. From some of the patients and the volunteer visits conducted, it was not made clear to them through the advertisements, signage, phone calls, or even in person what services were available at the pregnancy center. Advertisements say things like, "Pregnant? You have choices. We can help." "Thinking About Abortion? Care Net is your first step." "Your Options: Adoption, Parenting, Abortion." "Thinking About Abortion? First Thing's First" when in reality, none of these centers offer or refer for abortion care.

There are clear cases of deception that are happening in the state. Any organization can provide services, however it should be clear to people what those services are. This is a bill that does nothing more than require transparency and honesty in advertising. I urge members of the committee to take the necessary steps to regulate the advertising practices of limited services pregnancy centers.

Excerpts from the in-person visits and collected patient stories are included here, a full report on crisis pregnancy centers in Connecticut is available online at NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut.¹²

Alisha*, 26, Volunteer visit to a crisis pregnancy center in Central Connecticut

"She reviewed all my medical history, prior pregnancies, what medications I take, she asked if I was in an abusive relationship. Then she was like ok we're gonna do the pregnancy test now. She showed me the two lines and said I was pregnant. We were all silent for two minutes and she didn't say anything. When you go upstairs it's a nice area with two desks and couches, but when you walk through that room there's a whole set up, a whole OB-GYN like an exam room. It looked like a real clinic. It looked legit. I asked, "What are my options? I don't really want to be pregnant?" So then she mostly said adoption, parenting, and then said well there's abortion. But she kept saying you have a lot of time, you don't need to make a decision now, she didn't really want to talk about abortion. I asked her about the abortion pill, so then she started off neutral and told me about the abortion pill. She said you could be laying in your bed and bleed all over and you could see the baby in your bed. She couldn't pronounce any of the medications. She was looking things up on her phone and she was texting people during the appointment.

Eventually she got mad when I asked about abortion. She just kept telling me I had time to make a decision and not to worry and that I didn't need to decide now. She just kept saying you have time. You have time to decide. When I was leaving they wanted me to make another appointment. Then they asked if they could pray for me."

Shania*, 21

Patient deceived by a crisis pregnancy center in the Greater Hartford area:

"When we parked there were people outside and I didn't want to get out of the car. I was scared. When I was walking to the building there was a door open and the lady said, "Come in here" to me and my mom. She was on the phone and said "I have to call you back I have a patient coming in" and sat us down. The lady was just being really obnoxious to me and saying stuff that had me scared. She didn't ask for my ID or health insurance. She was saying I was sinning if I get an abortion and that I'm gonna regret it. She was saying stuff like if I get a surgical one I might not make it out alive. She said that someone had half a baby left inside her after. She was ignoring what I was saying and just kept saying all this stuff. She had us sit down and talk with her like that was the

¹ Prochoicect.org

² ExposeCPCsCT.org

real place. She just kept saying way too much stuff and my mom was like come on we gotta leave. It was really scary because sometimes people are not ready to have a baby but this was a really bad experience. My experience was really bad for the first time because the things she was saying were uncalled for, then seeing all the stuff in the office scared me as well. A lot of the rooms were dark and there was a basket of little baby dolls on the floor. If I didn't have my mom with me they might have changed my mind because I was scared. We asked her where is the appointment for the abortions and she said there's no abortion center here..."

J.*, 26, Volunteer who visited a crisis pregnancy center in Southeastern Connecticut

"My fiancé and I went to a pregnancy center in the New London area. On the homepage of the website it says "Considering Abortion? Care Net is your first step." The website also says they offer free pregnancy services such as ultrasounds, pre-termination evaluations, information about options, free pregnancy tests. It says everything is professional and confidential and you can schedule your appointment online. The waiting room area had usual pamphlets like any doctors office. My fiancé told the lady in there she thought she might be pregnant and asked for a pregnancy test.

When the receptionist called her in, they did not want me to come in the room and said it was against policy, but because my fiance insisted, they allowed me to come in. The back rooms were small. There was an exam room and a few other small rooms that looked like conference rooms. The counseling room we went into was small. The counselor was super friendly and welcoming at first. The conversation started out normal as she asked us what brought us in today, etc.

Throughout the beginning of the appointment I really felt welcomed and comfortable. However the more comfortable we got, the more personal and then aggressive the counselor got with us. She asked my fiance what she was thinking of doing about the pregnancy and she said she wanted to terminate the pregnancy. The counselor stated that they didn't do those there but they had counseling to help her make the decision. She then told us a personal story about how she had been raped 20+ years ago and had gotten an abortion. She said getting the abortion was the worst decision of her life and she regretted it everyday and even had PTSD because of it.. She then told us how abortions can make it hard for women to conceive again, and that they offered services at their center to help mothers support the babies through the first year.

She also advised my fiance NOT to tell anyone she was pregnant until she made an additional appointment at the center to further discuss her options. She was very persistent about my fiance not telling anyone she was pregnant. The longer we were in there and the more my fiance vocalized her opinions on not being able to have a baby at her age, the more aggressive the counselor got about her not having an abortion.

The counselor wanted us to wait at the center as they were going to call the nurse in that day to give an ultrasound. We said she had to work and they replied with the nurse could be there in 30 minutes as she was not in on the day we went. They were very persistent about wanting us to see the nurse that day.

Overall the longer we were there the more uncomfortable I felt. I hope that when someone is looking for a real reproductive health clinic they do not end up at this place.

No woman should have to go through all of this just to get a pregnancy test and possibly make medical decisions like abortion.

Sierra*, 25, Patient deceived and intercepted in the greater Hartford area

“First off I didn't know where I was going. We opened the door of the wrong building and this lady was standing there and came up and forcibly was trying to give me her papers. I said, "No thank you" and she goes "we're offering \$50 and free ultrasounds" and I told her "no thank you I don't need that" and again she goes "well we're offering \$50 here" like \$50 was going to make a difference in my life. Then she walked behind us all the way to the door of the other building.”

Anna*, 22, Volunteer who visited a crisis pregnancy center

“The first thing I noticed when we pulled up to our assigned fake clinic in the New Haven area was its location. It was almost adjacent to Yale University, and my friend and I had trouble finding the clinic because it was tucked away behind a legitimate OB-GYN. We parked in “patient parking.” It felt like we were walking up to a doctor's office. Of course, I knew that this could not have been further from the truth, and that the Crisis Pregnancy Center had purposefully placed itself next to a real OB-GYN, near students who would not know the difference, and without putting in much effort to distinguish themselves from the legitimate medical office with which they shared a building.

I was going undercover as a college student who had just found out that she was pregnant, was in an unstable relationship with the father, and was young and naïve enough to not have a full understanding of birth control, abortion, and the manipulative tactics of CPCs like the one I was attending. The website for the CPC offered services like “abstinence and STD education,” and under “Pregnancy Choices,” they said they could give me “Abortion information and medical facts.” I wanted to see what sort of “education” they could offer me.

When we finally found the CPC, we entered what might have been a child's playroom. There were piles of baby shoes in a corner, and baby dolls propped up everywhere. Poems and prayers lined the walls, as well as “informational material” letting us know when my baby could feel pain or had ten toes. I noted that a big poster told me my baby could feel comfort and pain at just ten weeks, when I know for a fact that pain nociceptors are not even developed until twenty weeks, and the ability to understand pain signals is not developed until full term. I went in to the bathroom (which was, of course, equipped with a changing table and a baby doll at the ready) to take my free pregnancy test, at which point I noticed a poem entitled “My Silent Plea” on top of the toilet, which described a violent image of abortion, obviously meant to guilt-trip women in my very situation. After my pregnancy test, I went back into the waiting room for “counseling.”

What struck most about the “counseling” was the blatant lack of knowledge on the part of the CPC worker. The worker told me that pregnancies were “not as strong” until about the ninth or tenth week, so I should “come in again” for further testing, which seemed like a tactical delay so that I would wait longer to potentially get an abortion. Even if I wanted to keep the baby, this would have also delayed me in getting prenatal care. She insisted that she, as a Christian, was against abortion and birth control—as though you can't be a Christian and for reproductive health. She told me and my friend that abortions and birth control were “dangerous,” and that “lots of students” can “easily” raise a child and be in school full-time. In addition, the counseling was conducted in the waiting room without any privacy whatsoever, and a family with three small children sat

nearby while we discussed tense, emotional topics. It seemed incredibly inappropriate and there was not even a semblance of confidentiality.

I thought the experience was deeply disturbing, and I was shocked at how little a “counselor” could know. It was an obvious example of misinformation and deception, as well as purposeful delaying in decision-making. I imagined how scared and confused I would be if I had just come to the CPC without my background knowledge, because not only did it seem like it was a part of an actual OB-GYN office, it also offered contradictory advice. They gave me many informational pamphlets that stressed adoption over abortion, saying that in adoption my “pregnancy would end with life,” but in abortion, my pregnancy would “end in death,” and I might feel “shame or guilt,” and I “will remember taking a life.” This was a horrible facility meant to trick people who don’t know specifically that it is a fake clinic. It was deeply upsetting to experience, and should never be something experienced by any woman in the community.”

Amy*, 23, Volunteer who visited a crisis pregnancy center in Western Connecticut.

“Last year, I visited a crisis pregnancy center in Western Connecticut. For this crisis pregnancy center, some of the results from an online search of “abortion waterbury” say “Abortion and your health. Thinking about pregnancy or abortion? Facing an unplanned pregnancy but not sure about abortion? We can help you find answers.” Especially when someone is unsure and nervous about where to go, these ads are very overwhelming. At the time of this visit I was volunteering my time to help NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut with research about these centers. Our goal was to get a better look at how this crisis pregnancy center actually operates and what information, or lack thereof, they give to women about pregnancy and their options. It’s very easy to be deceived by these centers-- you can find their ads on buses, billboards, and especially while searching online.

When I called to make an appointment, I was directly connected to the center’s weekend hotline. The woman answering the phone was very vague and didn’t ask many questions. She just told me I could come in for a pregnancy test and “talk through my options.” She didn’t say much about what was offered there but on the website it said “Client Services, Pregnancy Information, Pregnancy Choices, Sexual Health, Abortion & Health Risks.” I could see how someone would be unsure.

I arrived at the crisis pregnancy center with a friend who came to support me. We were instructed to come to the back door and were invited in by a woman. We walked through the kitchen, with lots of religious pictures and decorations. At this point, the woman asked for my support person to stay in the kitchen while we talked. I emphasized that I was scared and wanted my friend with me. We went back and forth again, but eventually she agreed to let me have my support person come with me into a living room with a desk that the woman sat behind. While I took a pregnancy test, she talked to my friend and got more information about me and the situation. I told her that I was currently single, and that the father did not know about the pregnancy. My friend added that she did not approve of him, and the woman scoffed and said, “Well, you probably should have figured that out before you got into bed with him, huh?” I was shocked she would say something like that during what was supposed to be a counseling session.

When the test came back positive, she told me about the joys of motherhood, even though I was clearly distressed, and pulled out a few dolls that were supposed to be the size of a fetus at 8 weeks and said “These babies are what your baby looks like right now.” The dolls she pulled out were clearly bigger and more detailed than an actual fetus at 8 weeks. I kept saying, “I do not want to be pregnant. I can’t have a baby.” She said that she would only talk to me about having the baby and adoption. She never said the word abortion and told me that if that’s what I decided to do, I’d have to live with my decision for the rest of my life and would disappoint my family if I made the wrong choice. She was very shameful and told me to think about what my grandparents would think about my decision. At some point during the conversation, the woman began to direct all conversation to my friend instead of talking to me or answering my questions. She said to my friend, “Clearly she’s too overwhelmed by this news to think straight or absorb anything, so I’ll just talk to you.” I felt unheard and patronized by the whole experience, like I was only a body, not a whole person.

We left with lots of brochures on parenting and adoption, as well as a list of catholic hospitals and doctors offices they referred to. The woman told my support person to call if I needed more support or wanted to be put in touch with any of their parenting programs or adoption services.

After this experience, I feel horrified knowing that women facing unintended pregnancy might come to this crisis pregnancy center seeking nonjudgmental support and accurate information. Instead, it was my experience that women receive biased, inaccurate, and oftentimes demeaning counseling. If I was a woman in that situation, I could have easily believed what the woman told me. If a woman is specifically looking for information about abortion or reproductive healthcare I would be scared about what is told to her in this crisis pregnancy center. When someone is seeking all-options counseling from a legitimate clinic, they shouldn’t have to go through this confusion and shame.

Tara*, 21, Woman who was deceived by a crisis pregnancy center in central Connecticut.

“In 2015, I was 19 and there was a possibility that I could’ve been pregnant. I had just enrolled in college and I was scared, helpless, and confused! I didn’t know what to do, who to talk to or where to go. I lived in Middletown, CT my whole life and during my commutes to our local grocery store, I would often pass the ABC Women’s Center. They would frequently advertise that they offer free pregnancy tests and moral support. I thought this would be a health clinic that could help me in my situation.

When I walked in, I was greeted by their receptionist, she asked why I was there, and I told her. They asked for my ID and information. She provided me the supplies I needed to perform the pregnancy test. Afterwards, I brought into a room that was like a counselor’s office. A few minutes passed by, and another women entered the room and indicated that my test results were negative! I was so relieved!

The women then started asking me what was my religious affiliation was and if I was considering birth control. I explained to her that I did not identify with any religion and I wanted to explore my birth control options. The lady then began to hand me different pamphlets on religion and a lecture me on how the only form of birth control is

abstinence and that all other forms can harm my body. She made me feel uncomfortable and guilty that I was sexually active. I will never go to this crisis pregnancy center ever again. Women shouldn't be confused about what kind of help they can get at a pregnancy center."

Emergency Room Physician, Hartford area

"Betty was a young woman whom I met in the Emergency Room for abdominal pain. Her pregnancy was visibly showing and her aunt was convinced she had a tumor. She revealed to me that she was hiding her pregnancy from her family and had been seeing a women's center, a crisis pregnancy center, in Hartford because she wanted a termination. She told me she had gone every few weeks for last few months, but was not given any instructions on how to have an abortion yet. Performing her ultrasound, I was able to determine her fetus was 25 weeks and 4 days, past the legal limit for abortion. I had to tell her that even though she had clearly indicated her desire to terminate her desires had been realized months prior, now she had no choice in the matter because she had been misled and pushed past the legal limit. As I watched tears stream down her face, my heart broke that HER life and dreams had not been valued and she was blocked from getting the medical care she needed."