

Dear Members of the Public Health Committee:

My name is Maggie Strunk and I am the Client Services Director of Hope Pregnancy Center in Cheshire. I am testifying in opposition of Bill 835. HPC is being targeted as part of a national campaign to discredit and eventually shut down organizations that assist thousands of pregnant women and their children every year in our state. Nationally, while NARAL has succeeded in obtaining support, most if not all, of the resulting laws have been struck down by the courts. They have tried to use unsubstantiated facts and hearsay to make pregnancy resource centers appear deceitful and manipulative. Since 1985, HPC has offered non-judgmental, free, confidential, genuine support and material resources to women and their families. Every woman who calls receives information, resources and a verbal disclaimer that we do not perform nor refer for abortions. Every single client that receives our services sign off on a form that states they fully understand that we do not perform nor refer abortions. From a simple google search, anyone can clearly see that disclaimer posted on all social media platforms and our website. HPC clients know what we provide before stepping in the door. Yet they continue to come for help, support, and resources.

Requiring centers to refer for abortions goes against our religious beliefs as a faith-based center. Therefore not only is this bill legally a waste of time, but is in fact contrary to our religious freedom. No other organization is demanded to write a disclaimer about services they don't offer. Are abortion clinics required to provide a list of what services they do not offer? This bill is clearly targeting faith-based pregnancy centers, otherwise there would be an effort for other organizations that support pregnant women to write disclaimers about services they do not offer.

We do not spend all our time judging and shaming women for their current pregnancy decision or previous pregnancy decisions, as NARAL often accuses all pregnancy resource centers of being guilty of. We are here to offer support with gentleness and compassion. HPC is proud to be an affiliate of CareNet and the Connecticut Pregnancy Care Coalition because of the high standards of policies and procedures. Many of our clients who have received such care, can testify to this. We have not received one single complaint from anyone claiming that they were deceived by our center. I have personally spoken with hundreds of women, some pregnant, some post abortive and some who are moms that are struggling, especially financially during this pandemic. Many of which have been contacting me and calling after hearing about this bill, wondering if the support and resources we offer will be diminished if this bill goes through.

If we were deceptive in any way, would we be getting referrals from 211, WIC, DCF, state social workers, Yale and St. Mary's hospital social workers, high school teachers, guidance counselors, etc.? Why does the state refer women to our centers, and then try to pass a bill to attack and manipulate how we run our organizations? Organizations, I might add, that are of no cost to the state because they are privately funded. If we demonstrated "shame" or "stigma", would clients drive on average 30- 45 minutes to our center to receive our support? Would groups such the local food pantry, local high school group, girl scout organizations and the Cheshire community support our moms with material resources if they believed that I am giving our clients disinformation over the phone? This bill raises too many questions for representatives and constituents on both parties, and answers none of them.

Including my own state representative, many have stated that this bill goes against the “bad actors” and the centers that deceive, but the term “deceptive” is extremely legally ambiguous that there is no guarantee that if this bill goes through, the attorney general will spare our center. If there are false accusations towards other centers, how can our center be sure that we are spared from false accusations after the bill goes through? Hope Pregnancy Center has been an essential organization, and an essential part of our community to support women and their families during these unprecedented times.