



The Women's Centers

Providing compassionate abortion and reproductive health services

Atlanta Women's Center

Cherry Hill Women's Center

Hartford GYN Center

Delaware County Women's Center

Philadelphia Women's Center

February 10th, 2021

Chairpersons Senator Abrams and Representative Steinberg, and Committee Members
Public Health Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 300
Hartford, CT 06106

Re: Testimony Regarding Senate Bill 835; AN ACT CONCERNING DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING PRACTICES OF LIMITED SERVICES PREGNANCY CENTERS

Dear Senator Abrams and Representative Steinberg, and distinguished members of the Public Health Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Senate Bill 835.

My name is Roxanne Sutocky and I serve as the Director of Community Engagement for The Women's Centers. We provide unparalleled abortion care and reproductive health services at five affiliated Centers located along the East Coast in Georgia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and here in Connecticut. Since 1978, Hartford GYN Center has served as an established community resource for those seeking vital reproductive health services in the South Green section of Hartford and the surrounding New England area. We pride ourselves on providing reproductive health care, including first and second trimester abortion, that is patient-centered. Our registered and licensed staff are experts in the field and we are routinely referred to by area specialists, hospitals and universities. Our designation as a Connecticut Family Planning Center requires commitment to excellent patient care, commendable safety records, continually educated medical staff, modern medical equipment, and high standard policies and procedures. Our role as medical professionals is one we take very seriously, as we know our patients trust us with their well-being and their very lives.

On behalf of our team at Hartford GYN Center, trusted medical providers and longtime Connecticut community members, I urge you to pass Senate Bill 835. This bill enacts needed protections against false and misleading advertisements by fake women's health centers meant to delay or intervene in access to legitimate reproductive healthcare services. Fake women's health centers open up next door to abortion clinics, mimic the appearance and names of abortion clinics, and place advertisements that make it appear they offer the full range of family planning services when they do not, all in the name furthering their antiabortion agenda rather than promoting patient health. In Connecticut, a majority of these centers operate in municipalities with existing reproductive healthcare providers. Because these centers are frequently located close to abortion clinics and have names and logos similar to nearby abortion clinics, patients mistakenly seek care there rather than at their intended destination.

This is certainly the case at Hartford GYN Center, where we have been forced to respond to a center that rebranded and relocated in an attempt to deceive patients. After the Hartford Women's Center, previously the St. Gerard Center for Life, moved into our medical complex and claimed near-identical name and signage, we experienced an increase in the number of patients that presented to our center reporting confusion and interruptions. In response, we changed the way we answer our phones, adjusted our building signage, painted our walkways with high visibility paint, and enlisted a team of community volunteers to educate and assist people to their scheduled appointments. See appendix 1, A for photo of our adjusted signage. Make no mistake, the stated goal of fake women's health centers like Hartford Women's Center is to identify patients seeking to prevent or end a pregnancy and persuade them to do otherwise. See appendix 1, B for examples from Hartford Women's Center's Executive Director sharing their intention to cause patients to turn away from their



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preferred medical care setting.

We are incredibly grateful to the public officials who are working tirelessly to develop policies that promote the health and wellbeing of our communities, especially those already marginalized by the healthcare system and at disproportionate risk for COVID-19 infection. As medical providers, we want people to have the best possible health outcomes. Right now, we urge folks to stay home, wash their hands, and stand aside and let people access the medical care they need without interference. It is troubling that some community members, including several testifying here today, choose to disregard stay at home orders and social distancing, endangering the public health. At our facility and at Centers around the country that provide abortion care, protestors are assembling in groups and approaching patients and essential medical staff in defiance of the guidance from national, state, and local bodies meant to stem the spread of this pandemic- all while distributing literature advertising fake women's health centers. While deceptive advertisements are just one tactic of unregulated fake women' health centers, limiting this practice would materially help to mitigate their harms. Clear and honest advertising directed at those seeking medical care should be the standard practice here in Connecticut.

Patients' health depends on being able to access timely medical services - as a result, fallacious practices that delay access to healthcare can endanger patient health and safety. Emergency Contraception and Abortion Care are among the time-sensitive services provided by Family Planning Clinics like Hartford GYN Center. Any delay in access can result in a patient be unable to get the care they seek at all, increasing the likelihood they will face an unplanned pregnancy or be required to carry a pregnancy to term against their will and better judgement. When patients are in our office, we are frequently surprised to hear them say that they are "relieved" that we are able to help them, and that they were unable to access care they requested at previous visits to other centers. When we ask follow up questions, we often discover that our patients conducted online searches for words like "abortion" and "pregnancy options," leading them to make one or more calls or visits to fake women's health centers before arriving in our office days, weeks, or even months later.

Delays in access to abortion care can have serious health and other implications. According to an independent study conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, all four types of abortion – medication, aspiration, dilation & evacuation (D&E) and induction – are safe and rarely result in serious complications. Even though abortion is exceedingly safe throughout pregnancy, the costs and risks do increase as gestation continues, and being denied a wanted termination has been proven detrimental to women and their families' health and economic wellbeing. The Turnaway Study, conducted by Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health, revealed the consequences of being denied a wanted abortion, including a four times greater likelihood of living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and increased complications from the end of pregnancy including eclampsia and death. By deceptively diverting patients seeking health care through their own doors instead, fake women's health centers cause unnecessary delays that needlessly imperil patient's health and lives.

Deception and delay in seeking healthcare can also impact the patient-provider relationship once a patient eventually makes her way to a reputable health care provider. At Hartford GYN Center, our patients rely on us to provide them with the high-quality care and the evidence-based information and resources they need to make personal decisions about their pregnancies. Establishing a trusting relationship with our patients is a crucial part of this provision of care. Unfortunately, the deceptive advertising practices employed by fake women's health centers do a great deal to undermine the patient-provider relationship, making it more difficult for pregnant people to access the care they need.

One example of this breakdown of patient and provider relationship happened when 21 year old Hartford resident named Shania* scheduled an appointment with Hartford GYN Center to seek care for an unplanned



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pregnancy. On her way to her appointment, Shania and her mother were instructed by volunteers or staff of the Hartford Women's Center to enter Hartford Women's Center. The center's staff person told them to "come in here" and then proceeded to tell Shaina that if she had an abortion, she would be "sinning" and that she "might not make it out alive." Shania and her mother left the office after being told, "There is no abortion center here."

With the help of community volunteers, Shania and her mother were able to find their way to Shania's scheduled appointment at Hartford GYN Center. Shania reported feeling "scared" and a majority of the appointment involved talking about the experience, explaining that the person she talked to was not a medical professional, identifying misinformation and providing factual information. When Shania decided to seek care in her pregnancy, she expected unbiased, non-coercive pregnancy counseling and abortion care from medical professionals. Unfortunately, before she was able to access that care at Hartford GYN, she was misled and confronted with lies and shame.

Patients seeking health care rely on their medical providers to offer them the high-quality, evidence-based information and services they seek. These folks place their well-being in the hands of strangers, trusting that we are well-trained, licensed providers who are equipped to tell them everything they need to know in order to make the decisions that are best for them. By engaging in deceptive, misleading advertising practices, fake women's health centers attempt to exploit that trust, and thereby keep patients from accessing care. As anti-choice activist Abby Johnson stated during a fake clinic training through Heartbeat International, "We want to appear neutral on the outside, The best call, the best client you ever get is one that thinks they're walking into an abortion clinic. Okay? Those are the best clients that could ever walk in your door or call your center—the ones that think you provide abortions."

The people of Connecticut deserve better, including a state statute limiting deceptive advertising practices of limited services pregnancy centers, and I strongly encourage you to promote health, dignity, privacy, and autonomy by passing Senate Bill 835.

With Gratitude,

Roxanne Sutocky
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**Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the individual.*



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Appendix 1.

- A. Photo of signage outside Hartford GYN Center that was placed to counter the misleading name and signage of Hartford Women's Center (previously St. Gerard's Center for Life.) This sign was added to assist patients confused and misdirected by the fake women's health center's signage. The supplemental signage reads, "Accurate Medical Information, Licensed Providers, Respect for your Decision, and Abortion Services at Hartford GYN Center."



Leticia Velasquez

Timeline Photos · Feb 1 · 🌐

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B. Screenshots of Hartford Women's Center (previously St. Gerard's Center for Life) Executive Director detailing plans to redirect patients seeking services at Hartford GYN patients into their clinic.



Leticia Velasquez

November 30 at 3:15pm · 🌐

Here is the miracle you prayed for: St Gerard's Center for Life just opened an office a few feet away from an abortion facility in Hartford CT. Lives will be saved, and souls restored! Thank you from the bottom of my heart, please keep our efforts in your prayers!



Leticia Velasquez

The view if from our office waiting room to the entrance of the abortion facility. A woman coming for her appointment can make the RIGHT decision (turn right!) and save her baby and herself!

Like · 🍷 8 · Reply · More · Wednesday at 4:51pm



Helen Rogers

God bless you all!!! ❤️❤️

Like · 🍷 1 · Reply · More · Wednesday at 5:05pm



Cynthia Hintz

How perfect! 😊

Like · 🍷 1 · Reply · More · Wednesday at 7:06pm



Write a reply...

Reply

