

February 8, 2021

S.B. 835 AN ACT CONCERNING DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING PRACTICES OF LIMITED SERVICES PREGNANCY CENTERS.

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

My name is Alicia di Leo; I am a resident of Ellington, CT. I submit testimony today urging you to pass S.B. 835 an Act Concerning Deceptive Advertising Practices of Limited Services Pregnancy Centers.

Since 2017, I have been privileged to be a volunteer patient escort at the Hartford GYN Center in downtown Hartford. On the mornings when I served as escort, I watched countless women be subjected to the taunts, pleadings, and proselytizing of protesters, most of whom showed up faithfully every single week. It sickens me that women are subjected to such harassment when they are in need of time-sensitive healthcare that may include medical or surgical abortions.

Crisis Pregnancy Centers, or Limited Services Pregnancy Centers, use deliberately deceptive language and signage in an attempt to get women or couples through their doors. Their goal is to “counsel” a woman away from abortion. These centers are often in medically underserved areas of our state, and often times are deliberately situated within close proximity to a full-service medical clinic that provides abortions. (It is no accident that the CPC called Hartford’s Women Center rented space in a building which *literally* shares a walkway with the Hartford GYN Center.) A CPC counseling against abortion is entirely within an organization’s right, and this bill does not infringe upon that right. This bill merely states that advertising must make clear that the organization in question does not provide medical services. A payday lender cannot falsely claim it is a FDIC-insured bank; a bottle of dietary supplements is marked with clear language that its product hasn’t been FDA approved. We are asking that CPCs across the state be held to that same level of marketing oversight.

There is no First Amendment protection for deceptive practices or advertising. The City of Hartford passed an ordinance in the winter of 2017 requiring CPCs to post signage stating there was no medical personnel on the premises. That does not infringe upon the clinic’s speech; it simply clarifies that medical procedures (i.e., abortion) are not offered. All women in the state of CT – not just those who can access clinics in Hartford -- deserve to be protected from clinics who falsely advertise.

What does false advertising look like? It looks like buses with signs that proclaim, “Pregnant? We can help!” It looks like non-medical people wearing white lab coats in photos. It looks like heartbeat EKG graphics in their brochures. It looks like ultrasound machines being prominently displayed in their marketing materials.

Time is of the essence in a crisis pregnancy. For many, a day off from work to access healthcare is an economic burden. For many, so is the cost of transportation to a clinic. Imagine then, a woman (or couple) enduring those lost wages and cost of travel, to mistakenly enter a Limited Services Pregnancy Center because of a fraudulent advertisement, when their intention was to schedule an abortion. Lost wages and travel costs can be calculated; what cannot be calculated is the emotional trauma this sort of deception causes.

This bill is not about abortion. This bill is about truth in advertising. It is about protecting CT residents from fraudulent marketing materials to ensure they can access medical care they are legally entitled to receive.

I sincerely ask you promote the passage of S.B. 835. Thank you for your time and your service to our state.

Alicia di Leo
Ellington, CT