



Choosing Lies and Deception: Crisis Pregnancy Centers in North Carolina

Across the country, anti-choice activists are working to limit women's reproductive health options by restricting access to abortion and birth control. In addition to legislative action, one branch of this movement is targeting pregnant women through "crisis pregnancy centers" that use lies and scare tactics to prevent women from making informed choices about abortion.

Crisis pregnancy centers, or CPCs, often advertise themselves in the yellow pages and online as providing "pregnancy counseling" or "abortion information." These anti-choice organizations present themselves as a source of neutral information and advice. In fact, however, the primary goal of the CPC movement is to persuade women to carry pregnancies to term.

Crisis Pregnancy Centers in North Carolina

In North Carolina there are at least 70 of these anti-choice "pregnancy centers." Volunteers from NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina carried out an investigation of the CPCs' tactics. During the summer of 2003, volunteers called and visited ten crisis pregnancy centers in the Triangle, Charlotte, Triad, and Wilmington areas, presenting themselves as women who thought they might be pregnant and were considering abortion. The volunteers recorded phone conversations and took detailed notes on site visits. They also gathered printed information given out by the CPCs and researched CPC advertising in phone books and online.

During the course of this investigation, volunteers recorded multiple instances of CPCs misleading women. For example:

CPCs provided false information about the medical consequences of abortion.

- Crisis Pregnancy Center of Gaston County told an investigator that if you have an abortion, "you could very possibly become sterile." (Studies show no increased risk of fertility problems or poor birth outcomes for women who have first-trimester abortions.)
- Randolph Pregnancy Care Center, in Asheboro, told an investigator that having an abortion could increase the risk of breast cancer up to 800%. (According to the National Cancer Institute, reliable scientific evidence shows no link between abortion and breast cancer.)

CPCs misled women about birth control and emergency contraception.

- Alamance Pregnancy Services, in Burlington, told an investigator that all condoms are defective and have slots and holes in them.
- Birthchoice, in Raleigh, told an investigator that emergency contraception (“the morning after pill”) was not available in the United States.

CPCs attempted to discredit other, more reliable, sources of information about abortion.

- Rowan County Pregnancy Counseling Center, in Salisbury, told an investigator that she would give her “factual truths” about abortion that were concealed by “society” and the “news media.”
- Pregnancy Life Care Center, in Raleigh, told an investigator that “other agencies” might not give her all the necessary information about the side effects of abortion.

All of the CPCs investigated by NARAL provide free pregnancy tests, and some centers also offer free ultrasounds. These services lend legitimacy to the centers, and may attract low-income women without access to medical care. However, the centers are not medically licensed. The pregnancy tests given by the centers during NARAL’s investigation were over-the-counter tests, and the results were interpreted by volunteer “counselors” with no formal medical training. When investigators asked about other reproductive health services, such as STD testing or birth control pills, the CPCs responded that they would not or could not provide information about these services.

The false information given out by CPCs is especially damaging because the pregnancy centers advertise themselves as providing unbiased information to women in need of advice. Of the centers contacted during NARAL’s investigation, only half identified themselves as anti-abortion during phone conversations. Phone book listings separate CPCs from abortion providers by listing them under “Abortion Alternatives,” with a header specifying that they counsel against abortion. However, many CPCs are also listed under the more neutral-sounding “Pregnancy Counseling” listing, where they may be grouped with Planned Parenthood and other medically licensed facilities. Because there are so many more CPCs than abortion providers in North Carolina (70+ CPCs versus only 16 providers), in some areas these fake clinics may be the only local option for women seeking information.

In addition to concerns about the services and counseling provided, NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina is also concerned that some of these deceptive organizations are funded through our state government. According to the Raleigh *News & Observer*, in 2004 over \$82,000 in tax payer money from a discretionary fund was funneled to Hope Pregnancy Care Center, a CPC in Stokes County, NC, to pay its mortgage.

Taking action

NARAL is working to inform women about the CPCs' misinformation agenda. When women are aware of the deception practiced by the fake clinic movement, they will be less likely to take false information at face value.

NARAL is also investigating avenues of legal action against crisis pregnancy centers. Federal legislation has been introduced in the United States House of Representatives requiring the Federal Trade Commission to regulate false advertising by organizations claiming to provide abortion services (H.R. 5052). If passed into law, this bill would prevent CPCs from presenting themselves as service providers. The negative impact of CPCs could also be reduced by requiring centers to disclose their anti-choice ideology before giving out information or engaging in counseling sessions.

In addition, CPCs that allow volunteers without specialized training to counsel clients could be construed as engaging in counseling without a license, in violation of the Licensed Professional Counselors Act. In at least one clinic investigated by NARAL, misinformation about the medical risks of abortion was provided by a CPC staff member identified as a nurse. This clinic may be in violation of the Nursing Practice Act, which stipulates that deceiving the public in the course of professional activity is cause for the revocation of a nursing license.

Conclusion

Some crisis pregnancy centers provide an honest and supportive setting for pregnant women to discuss reproductive options. However, many do not. The staff at these deceptive centers entice women to the center under the pretense of providing information, then use anti-abortion propaganda, misinformation and intimidation to pressure women to carry pregnancies to term. NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina will continue to push for increased regulation of these centers and will ask the Attorney General's office to investigate to determine if they are in violation of the Licensed Professional Counselors Act, and/or in violation of the Nursing Practice Act.

List of CPCs

The crisis pregnancy centers called or visited by NARAL volunteers are listed below, along with some of the investigators' impressions.

Alamance Pregnancy Services, Burlington

- Pamphlets given out by Alamance Pregnancy Services claim that abortion increases the risk of breast cancer and that all condoms were defective. During a site visit, the investigator found the counselor to be preachy and judgmental.

Pregnancy Care Center of High Point, High Point

- The investigator reported that the counselor seemed compassionate and friendly, but that she appeared to deliberately manipulate the administration of the pregnancy test, withholding the results of the test in order to produce anxiety in the client.

Randolph Pregnancy Care Center, Asheboro

- A counselor told the investigator that having an abortion under the age of 20 could increase the risk of breast cancer 800%. The counselor also reported that "studies have been done" showing that "9 out of 10 couples who go through an abortion, split up."

Birthright of Winston-Salem, Winston-Salem

- During a phone conversation, a Birthright representative claimed that Birthright helps women "learn what the options are" in a "loving and caring non-judgmental way." In contrast to these claims, when the investigator visited the offices, she was told by a counselor that abortion was "horrifying, ruins your life, devastating."

Pregnancy Life Care Center, Raleigh

- A phone volunteer claimed that "other agencies" lied to women about the side effects of abortion, including infertility and internal bleeding.

Birthchoice, Raleigh

- When an investigator called Birthchoice Raleigh, she was told that emergency contraception was not available in the United States. During a visit to the clinic, a counselor said that abortion is a big industry that makes a lot of money from killing babies, and that infertility was a common side effect of abortion.

Pregnancy Support Services of Wake Forest, Wake Forest

- A counselor told the investigator that condoms don't work, and wouldn't or couldn't give information about where to go for STD testing. Both breast cancer and infertility were given as side effects of abortion.

Rowan County Pregnancy Counseling Center, Salisbury

- When an investigator called the CPC for information about abortion, the CPC employee repeatedly told her that she would give her “factual truths” about abortion that were concealed by “society” and the “news media.” The phone counselor told the investigator that abortion was linked to higher risks of breast cancer and could cause infertility.

Crisis Pregnancy Center of Gaston County, Gastonia

- A phone volunteer told the investigator that “doctors won’t tell you everything you need to know.” The volunteer described the risks of abortion as bleeding, sterility, and death. A woman identified as a nurse said that abortion increased the risk of breast cancer.

Pregnancy Resource Center of Stanly County, Albermarle

- During a phone call to the center, the investigator was told that abortion could cause both sterility and breast cancer.