

California pro-life pregnancy centers fight moves to regulate speech

SAN FRANCISCO – Pro-life groups are expressing concern about calls by NARAL Pro-Choice California for state legislation requiring pro-life crisis pregnancy centers to post signs announcing they do not refer clients for abortion or birth control.

NARAL, which supports keeping abortion legal, recently issued a report accusing the centers of “deceptive practices,” saying that they do not state explicitly that they oppose abortion and birth control.

The group also claims that crisis pregnancy centers distribute medically inaccurate information about links between induced abortion and increased risk of infertility, breast cancer and mental distress.

Pro-life groups said they fear the move is an attempt to defend the economic interests of abortion providers at the expense of the free-speech rights of pregnancy resource centers.

“There are plenty of doctors who do not do abortions nor refer for abortions. Should these doctors be muzzled?” asked Robin Strom, executive director of Pregnancy Resource Center of Marin County in Novato, a state-licensed medical clinic which would likely be exempt from any further regulation. “It flies in the face of the First Amendment right of free speech.”

“Deception and fraud, to the other side, is in essence a complaint that we don’t refer or perform abortion,” said Thomas Glessner, president of the National Institute of Family and Life Advocates, representing about 3,000 crisis pregnancy centers nationally, in a phone interview with Catholic San Francisco, archdiocesan newspaper.

“A pregnancy center makes no money whatsoever when a woman chooses life,” he said. “A clinic makes a ton of money when a woman has an abortion.”

The Virginia, Maryland, Washington and Oregon state legislatures have rejected calls for similar disclaimer legislation, Glessner said. He said his organization is vigilant in holding the largely volunteer crisis pregnancy centers to standards of integrity.

Crisis pregnancy centers are nonprofit organizations established by pro-life supporters. They work to persuade pregnant women to give birth rather than to have an abortion. They range from storefronts offering pregnancy tests and infant clothing to full-scale medical clinics with ultrasound testing and prenatal care. Most are affiliated with Christian organizations.

The cover letter to NARAL's report on the centers, "Unmasking Fake Clinics: The Truth About Crisis Pregnancy Centers in California," notes that 41 percent of California counties do not have an abortion provider while 91 percent of California counties have at least one crisis pregnancy center.

"Our daughters, granddaughters, nieces and friends are at risk of unknowingly turning to one of these centers seeking honest and accurate information," Amy Everitt, NARAL Pro-Choice California state director, said in the letter. "Misleading women, especially those struggling with difficult decisions, is unacceptable."

The NARAL initiative comes as part of a national campaign by organizations that support legal abortions which has met some success at the local level but has so far failed at the state level.

During the past year, Baltimore City, Montgomery County and Austin, Texas enacted legislation requiring pregnancy resource centers to post signs in English and Spanish with the disclaimer that they do not refer for abortion or birth control. The Archdiocese of Baltimore filed a federal lawsuit in March against Baltimore's ordinance, saying it violates the rights of church members to freedom of speech and religion.

"NARAL is really putting pressure" on the crisis pregnancy centers, said Carol Hogan, California Catholic Conference spokeswoman.

"'Truth in advertising' should work both ways," said Vicki Evans, respect life

coordinator in the Office of Public Policy and Social Concerns of the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

“Truth be told,” she said, “Planned Parenthood’s largest profit center is abortion. Perhaps consideration should be given to requiring this fact to be posted at clinics whose primary service is abortion. Something like, ‘Abortion is our specialty.’”

NARAL claims that its investigation found numerous examples of medical misinformation given out by the centers, including linking induced abortion to breast cancer, infertility and mental distress.

But these links are supported by most peer-reviewed research, Evans said.

The birth control pill has been labeled as a carcinogen by the World Health Organization and 13 of 15 U.S. studies and 28 of 37 worldwide studies show a link between abortion and breast cancer, Evans said.

“NARAL’s use of ideology to trump science and medicine is bad enough, but its attempt to pass laws silencing those with opposing views is more alarming,” she said.