

### *The Pregnancy Center Movement:*

## **History of Crisis Pregnancy Centers**

Dawn Stacey M.Ed, LMHC

Facing an unplanned pregnancy can be an overwhelming time for many women, so many may seek guidance from a health-care clinic. It is important to find a clinic that will provide accurate, complete, and reliable information about all of your pregnancy options. Be especially cautious of crisis pregnancy centers as many advertise and name themselves to give the impression that they are neutral health-care providers. The majority of these facilities, however, have an anti-abortion philosophy. The pregnancy center movement is growing in the United States and dates back to its founding father, Robert Pearson.

### **The Pregnancy Center Movement:**

According to *Time* magazine, crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) are typically associated with Christian charities and are usually under the umbrella of one of three national groups – Heartbeat International, Care Net, and the National Institute of Family and Life Advocates. Two of these groups sponsor a 24-hour toll-free hotline where women can call for a referral to a CPC near them. They also fund billboards and pay a lot of money to try to gain top placement on the sponsored-links sections on internet search engines.

These billboards appear to be neutral and helpful for women who are facing an unplanned pregnancy. Yet, according to the Care Net Online Resource Catalog page (where crisis pregnancy center affiliates can purchase billboards, pamphlets, posters, and other advertising items), it reads:

*Free For Affiliates! The Care Net billboard was designed to reach the abortion-vulnerable and has proved to be an effective means of generating calls from women facing unplanned pregnancy.*

Some of the organizations that sponsor CPCs seem to try to represent their clinics as being nonbiased resources, so it is important to determine the affiliation of a CPC that you may wish to visit. Make sure to investigate whether or not an organization sponsors the client. If so, look into that group – as one can see from Care Net's own, public, internet catalog, unfortunately some of these CPCs could be operating from a more misleading and deceptive approach.

## **History of Crisis Pregnancy Centers:**

In 1967, the first Crisis Pregnancy Center in the United States was opened by Robert Pearson in Hawaii. As a way to promote the Pregnancy Center Movement, in 1969, Mr. Pearson then founded the anti-choice Pearson Foundation, a St. Louis-based organization to assist local groups in setting up crisis (anti-abortion) counseling centers. The foundation provides:

- Training sessions
- Slide shows - such as "*Caring*": a 27-minute show that "includes many pictures of bloody fetuses in waste cans and one of a gurney carrying a woman who is apparently dead and is covered by a sheet. It ends by comparing abortion to the final solution"
- Pamphlets
- Discounted video equipment
- Kits to perform urine tests
- A manual entitled *How to Start and Operate Your Own Pro-Life Outreach Crisis Pregnancy Center*

In 1984, Pearson authored this widely-used manual where he outlined the deceptive tactics that continue to characterize the behavior of many CPCs.

In the 1980s and 1990s, CPCs continued to grow and gain power through the support of organizations such as Focus on the Family, the Christian Action Council (now known as Care Net) and the National Institute of Family Life Advocates. CPCs have formed financial support networks through funding and franchise groups, like Birthright and Heartbeat International.

Recently, pregnancy resource centers have been trying to further their anti-choice persuasion efforts by seeking (and often obtaining) state and/or federal funding. These monies may come in the form of direct allocations or tax credits in state budgets, through the sales of "choose life" license plates (the revenues of which are used to fund CPCs), and through federal abstinence-only programs. As a result, crisis pregnancy centers now outnumber abortion clinics. There are an estimated 2,300 to 3,500 CPCs currently operating in the US while there are only 1,800 abortion clinics.

## **The Pearson Manual:**

*How to Start and Operate Your Own Pro-Life Outreach Crisis Pregnancy Center* is the manual authored by Robert Pearson and has been described by law-enforcement officials around the US as a 93-page guidebook of ways to mislead consumers. It instructs staff how to falsely portray a CPC as an abortion provider and how to evade

client questions on the telephone. Examples found in the manual include:

- Regarding when a caller asks if they provide abortion services, “there is nothing wrong or dishonest if you don’t want to answer a question that may reveal your pro-life position by changing the caller’s train of thought by asking a question in return”
- Recommends that staff answer the question “Are you a pro-life center?” with “We are a pregnancy testing center... What is pro-life?”
- Instructs centers to use neutral advertising, to seek listings in the Yellow Pages alongside abortion clinics and to adopt "dual names": one to "draw abortion-bound women" and one to attract donations from people against abortion
- Advises when answering inquiries about their pregnancy tests (the same home pregnancy tests available from a store), "Tell her it's a refined form of the old rabbit test. This usually satisfies them. At no time do you need to tell them what you're doing"
- Instructs staff to "never counsel for contraception"
- Cautions "do not tell the client that she is or is not pregnant." Instead, staff are told to only say whether test results are positive or negative
- The manual reads, "[o]ur name of the game is to get the woman to come in as do the abortion chambers. Be put off by nothing... Let nothing stop you. The stakes are life or death."

Robert Pearson has publicly admitted this deception; in a 1994 speech, he responded, “obviously, we’re fighting Satan... A killer, who in this case is the girl who wants to kill her baby, has no right to information that will help her kill her baby. Therefore, when she calls and says, ‘Do you do abortions?’ we do not tell her, No, we don’t do abortions.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, CPCs continued to grow and gain power through the support of organizations such as Focus on the Family, the Christian Action Council (now known as Care Net) and the National Institute of Family Life Advocates (NIFLA). CPCs have formed financial support networks through funding and franchise organizations such as Birthright and Heartbeat International. Recently, pregnancy resource centers have been trying to further their anti-choice persuasion efforts by seeking (and often obtaining) state and/or federal funding. These monies may come in the form of direct allocations or tax credits in state budgets, through the establishment of "choose life" license plates (the revenues of which are used to fund CPCs), and through federal “abstinence-only” programs. As a result, Crisis Pregnancy Centers now outnumber abortion clinics. There are an estimated 2,300 to 3,500 CPCs currently operating in the US while there are only 1,800 abortion clinics.

### **Funding for Pregnancy Resource Centers:**

Crisis pregnancy centers are eligible for federal abstinence-education grants because their primary mission is to promote abstinence. Agencies that provide comprehensive

sexual education are not eligible for these federal grants. Planned Parenthood, for example, reports that the majority of people who visit their clinics do so for birth control and reproductive health (that fewer than 1 in 10 women are there for an abortion). Pro-choice advocates are alarmed at the growth in the “pregnancy center” movement claiming that while counselors at CPCs will discuss the physical and psychological risks associated with abortion, they do not educate women about the risks of childbirth, which includes the fact that giving birth carries a risk of death that is 12 times higher than that of an abortion. They also fail to mention that the majority of women who have obtained an abortion report experiences of relief.

## Sources

Used in this article as well a general sources attesting to the truth about crisis pregnancy centers.

Care Net. (2007). Online Resource Catalog: Billboards.

Cooperman, A. (2002, Feb. 21). Abortion Battle: Prenatal Care or Pressure Tactics? 'Crisis Pregnancy Centers' Expand and Draw Criticism. *Washington Post.*

Gibbs, N. (2007, Feb. 26). The abortion campaign you never hear about. Crisis pregnancy centers are working to win over one woman at a time. But are they playing fair? *Time Magazine.*

Gross, J. (1987). Pregnancy Centers: Anti-Abortion Role Challenged.

Harrison, K. (2006). Crisis Pregnancy Centers.

Legal Momentum. (2007). Federal Abstinence-Only Funding of Crisis Pregnancy Centers.

Maloney, C. (2006). Stop Deceptive Advertising for Women’s Services Act: H.R.5052.

NARAL Pro-Choice America. (2007). The Truth About Crisis Pregnancy Centers.

Office of NY State Attorney General. (2002). Spitzer Reaches Agreement with Upstate Crisis Pregnancy Center.

National Abortion Federation. (2006). Crisis Pregnancy Centers: An Affront to Choice.

National Network of Abortion Funds. (2003). *Legal But Out of Reach* (4th ed.).

Introduction Excerpt.

Pearson, R. J. (1984). *How To Start and Operate Your Own Pro-Life Outreach Crisis Pregnancy Center.* St. Louis: Pearson Foundation.

Theophano, T. (2005). Anti-Choice "Crisis Pregnancy Centers": A Personal Account.

United States House of Representatives Committee On Government Reform. (2006).

False and Misleading Health Information Provided by Federally Funded Pregnancy Resource Centers.

Dawn Stacey is About.com's Guide to Contraception.

<http://contraception.about.com/>