



Limited Service Pregnancy Centers in King County Deceptive Practices Review 2016-2017

Crisis pregnancy centers, sometimes called pregnancy resource centers or limited service pregnancy centers, are organizations with the express purpose of discouraging pregnant people from having abortions or using contraceptives, and encouraging people to carry their pregnancies to term. These organizations are typically non-profits with religious affiliations.¹ Many of them also provide free resources, such as baby clothes, diapers, and strollers to new parents. Some also provide parenting support classes. Their services are free. They are located throughout the country.

In Washington State, as of 2016, there were approximately 60 such centers in our state. As of today, there are at least eight operating in King County.

The problem with many of these organizations is that they give people who come to their centers information about abortion and contraception that is medically inaccurate, sometimes outright false, and dangerous to public health.

Some of them are also not honest about the fact that they do not provide or refer for abortion and contraception. Others do provide that information; and, as promised, they will not refer people for abortion care or contraception.

In 2011, Legal Voice and Planned Parenthood Votes Washington published a report of the information collected by trained volunteer college and law students, who called or visited these centers in 2008 and 2009.² These students found that all but

¹ CareNet, “What is a Pregnancy Center,” www.carenet.org, visited June 7, 2017 (describing pregnancy centers as local, non-profit organizations, and explaining that CareNet affiliates, in addition to providing a variety of services such as pregnancy options counseling, limited ultrasound, and pregnancy testing, also “share the love of Jesus Christ in ways that are both practical and personal, and while caring prayer support is always available to clients, it is never imposed”); *see also*, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform – Minority Staff, Special Investigations Division, *False and Misleading Health Information Provided by Federally Funded Pregnancy Resource Centers*, pp. 1-2 (2006) (hereinafter “the Waxman Report”), available at <http://www.chsourcebook.com/articles/waxman2.pdf>.

² Legal Voice and Planned Parenthood Votes, *The Deceptive Practices of Limited Service Pregnancy Centers* (2011), available at https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/66711705/LimitedServicePregnancyCenters_2011Report.pdf.

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one of the limited service pregnancy centers visited in person, and the majority contacted by phone, did one or more of the following:

- Misled people about the nature of the center's services
- Provided false or misleading information about pregnancy, abortion, and miscarriage
- Provided false information about prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS
- Provided false or misleading information about contraception
- Refused to provide women with the written results of their pregnancy tests

To begin to update the 2011 report, a Legal Voice trained tester contacted all of Washington State's crisis pregnancy centers in 2016 by phone; she visited three King County pregnancy centers in person. Another tester visited a fourth King County pregnancy center, the brand new "3W Medical for Women," located in the University District, in 2017.

The results of those visits provide a helpful overview of the problems with crisis pregnancy centers – and, in the first case, an example of how crisis pregnancy centers could operate without deception and risks to public health.

Bethany Christian Services

Located in Shoreline, this organization's name provides notice to potential clients that this organization is not a reproductive health clinic and has a religious affiliation. Framed signs within the waiting area further indicate the religious nature of the organization. Our intern found that the center does not pretend to look like a clinic, and she was greeted by staff who were not dressed as medical professionals. She did not take a pregnancy test; they do not provide ultrasounds or STI testing. She was given pamphlets with accurate information about adoption, and staff told her that if she wanted to opt for abortion and wanted to talk to someone afterwards, they would "be there" for her. The center staff whom our tester met with suggested prayer, but then countered by saying it was "completely okay" not to be religious. The information pamphlets emphasize adoption, but did not include false information about abortion or contraception. The tester reported that it was obvious to her that the services of the pregnancy center were to provide non-professional counseling. **While the tester left without much information on where she could obtain abortion or contraception, other than a suggestion to call Planned Parenthood, she did not experience the center as coercive or deceptive.**

The experience of our testers was quite different at the other three centers.

Care Net Pregnancy & Family Services in Kenmore

At this center, the tester was asked to show photo identification and provide, in writing, her medical history and additional identifying information. She was also asked to sign a form stating that she understood that the organization does not provide or refer for abortion or

contraception. The waiting room looked like a professional office, and was decorated with a framed certificate from the Washington State Department of Health indicating that the organization is authorized to have a “test site provider perform microscopic procedures.”³ When she met with a staff member, she asked about abortion; the center staff person urged her to view the website “abortionchangesyou.com.”⁴

This staff member went on to tell the tester that abortion could take a huge emotional and spiritual toll on her, and that many, if not all, women had regrets later in life. **She was given medically inaccurate information about abortion, including that it causes infertility, sterility, breast cancer, and pelvic inflammatory disease.**⁵ One of the staff then recognized her from her visit to another center owned by the same organization in Pierce County, and angrily asked if she was a reporter; despite that, the other staff person continued to meet with her and encouraged her to come in for STI screening, and told her that they have a nurse practitioner on staff. **The pamphlets given the tester included a one-page form describing the symptoms of so-called “post abortion syndrome” – there is no such medically recognized syndrome.**⁶

One of the pamphlets, while not providing necessarily false information about condoms, strongly discourages condom use as being ineffective at preventing STIs and encouraged abstinence instead. She was also told that Care Net staff presented this information in local high school classes.

Pregnancy Aid of Kent

The tester called before her visit to Pregnancy Aid of Kent and asked about abortion. During that call, the center staff told her that her baby was unique, that she could hear in her voice “that you don’t want to do this,” and that she would never get over having an abortion for the rest of her life. When the tester went to the organization, she observed that it did not have the appearance of a medical clinic, and was filled with unpacked boxes and bags of diapers and

³This certificate was likely issued pursuant to RCW 70.42, Medical Test Sites.

⁴ “Abortionchangesyou.com” is a website that provides no medical information about abortion, and no links or referrals to abortion providers. Rather, it is a website based on the premise that abortion causes regret and emotional pain, and may lead to a long list of negative mental health repercussions (this claim has been debunked by multiple studies; see, e.g., American Psychological Association, Mental Health and Abortion, <http://www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/women/mental-health-and-abortion.aspx> (last visited June 23, 2017)).

⁵ These claims are false or misleading. See *The Deceptive Practices of Limited Service Pregnancy Centers*, *supra*, note 2, for additional information and citations.

⁶ See, e.g., *Post Abortion Syndrome isn’t real*, <http://www.apa.org/about/gr/issues/women/mental-health-and-abortion.aspx>; *The spread of ‘Post Abortion Syndrome’ as social diagnosis*, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953613006333>.

baby clothes; yet she was asked for identifying information including the last four digits of her social security number, her marital status, race, and age. When she asked why they wanted this information, she was told “we don’t do anything with it anyway.”

She was given a pregnancy test, and then spoke with center staff, who told her that she should not rely on a negative test result because she might have been drinking too much water. She was told that they did not provide other medical services. The tester asked about contraception, and was told they “didn’t have any”, but that **hormonal contraception had a lot of risks, and if you were on it for 10 years, you would have trouble getting pregnant.** Staff went on to tell her that **there was a higher risk of infertility with hormonal contraceptive shots and implants, and told her that you have to go back every six months for a new implant. She told her that condoms didn’t have those risks but were unreliable as contraception.** The center staff suggested some medical clinics that the tester could go to; **when Planned Parenthood came up, the staff person said “it was not as good as all the others because they only care about your pregnancy and don’t provide any other health services.”**

Before the tester left the center, staff gave her several pamphlets, including one with the letters “PP” crossed out, entitled “The Nation’s Leading Provider and Promoter of Abortion,” a 1986 publication of the National Right to Life Educational Trust Fund. Other pamphlets included a March of Dimes fetal development brochure and a DOH immunization brochure.

3W Medical for Women, University District, Seattle

The tester went to the 3W Medical for Women to take a pregnancy test and gather information. As advertised, the clinic is centrally located in the University District, in close proximity to many bus lines. The tester asked the intake staff person for a pregnancy test, which she had scheduled the day before for a later time. The staff person assured her that she could get a pregnancy test that day and asked her to wait in the waiting area, which looked like a typical walk-in clinic or physician’s office.

While the staff wore matching Mother Mary necklaces, there was initially no mention of religion or signs expressing religious affiliation. While the tester was waiting, she overheard a person whom she was later told was the doctor, speaking loudly to other staff that she could not help the tester because she was on hold with the IRS and they had no available nurses. It took several minutes for the front desk staff person and another staff to calm the doctor down and ask her to perform the pregnancy test.

While she was waiting, staff gave the tester several forms to complete. The forms included consent to use information for fundraising, consent to collect and store photographs of the patient, medical intake questionnaire, consent to allow 3W to text the patient, a purported HIPPA consent form. Another form asked her what church she attended and from what church she was referred to the center. She asked to not sign any of the forms except ones required to take a pregnancy test. She was then given a form specifically for consent to pregnancy test.

The tester filled out minimum information and allowed the staff to look at her driver's license, which was then photocopied without warning. The forms she asked not to fill out were filled out for her while she went into the clinic area with the physician. In the private clinic area, the physician brought the newly filled out forms for the tester to sign. One form required patients to turn off—not silence—all devices that could be used to record video or take pictures.

In the clinical area, the doctor expressed stress from not knowing how to perform a pregnancy test. She asked the tester to urinate into a cup and told her she would, "figure it out." Then, while they waited for results, the doctor asked the tester about her sexual history, birth control, stress, and safety.

The doctor eventually came back with a negative pregnancy test and told the tester that she was not pregnant. She kept her after the results came back to ask about her school and sex life. **The doctor explained that if the tester had been pregnant, it would be okay because "a baby is a blessing" and "pregnancy is a gift."**

In short, whether these organizations inform people about the nature of their services or not, people who seek their services leave with either no information about abortion or contraception, and often false or misleading information about abortion and contraception.