

## NC crisis pregnancy centers criticized in report

By Gary D. Robertson, Associated Press  
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RALEIGH -- Too many crisis pregnancy centers designed to discourage abortions are offering inaccurate information about the long-term health dangers of the procedure, and they often add a religious message to their counseling, an abortion-rights group alleged Monday.

The NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina Foundation released the findings of what it labeled an undercover investigation over the past year of 66 of the 122 such centers in the state. Visits, phone calls and website checks by people posing as pregnant women or their partners found that most don't have medical professionals on staff, the report said.

While NARAL officials said they are fine with groups that want to help women who choose to give birth, "lines are crossed when a center is not upfront about its limited services," said Carey Pope, NARAL's executive director in North Carolina, told reporters. "This is about women's health and the safety of the community."

The report recommends that government officials demand minimum medical standards of these centers, along with advertising that makes their medical capabilities clear. The report is the latest effort by people worried that recent legislation approved by the Republican-controlled General Assembly is discouraging access to legal abortions.

Physicians who provide abortions and Planned Parenthood affiliates in North Carolina already have sued to block a portion of new restrictions from taking effect Wednesday. A federal judge heard arguments last week from attorneys about whether the law violates the constitution with specifications of the way pre-abortion ultrasounds must be performed.

The centers are likely to play a more important role in the abortion debate because their numbers have nearly doubled in five years, and the law requires the state to give expectant mothers access to information about agencies that provide free ultrasounds. Many crisis pregnancy centers perform them. Centers under the umbrella of the Charlotte-based Carolina Pregnancy Care Fellowship also will share \$10 from each "Choose Life" license plate that now can be issued in North Carolina.

Bobbie Meyer, the fellowship's executive director, didn't respond Monday to a phone call and email seeking comment on the report. She told The News & Observer of Raleigh recently that clients are treated with respect and make up their own minds about how to proceed with a pregnancy. Staff workers at centers in the fellowship's network have undergone training and have at least one nurse on the staff, Meyer said.

"We're not twisting women's arms," she told the newspaper. "We're not manipulating them."

The report said 17 of the 66 crisis pregnancy centers reviewed stated that abortion leads to

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breast cancer and 43 contended abortion results in "post-abortion stress syndrome" for the woman. The National Cancer Institute has said there's no evidence linking early termination of a pregnancy to the causes of breast cancer, and the syndrome is not recognized by national psychological or psychiatric associations. Anti-abortion groups often cite studies backing their claims and testimonies of women affected negatively by their decision to have an abortion.

The report said more than half of the centers investigated were affiliated with Christian groups and many encouraged abstinence until marriage by using arguments from the Bible. One investigator who posed as a pregnant Jewish woman was told at five different centers she needed to become a Christian to go to heaven, the report said.

"Rather than providing long-term support for those women who need it, assistance by many (centers) is, in reality, sporadic and contingent upon submitting to religious education," the report read. NARAL chapters in at least four other states have performed similar investigations of centers.

Some crisis pregnancy centers provide housing to pregnant teenagers and help new mothers who want to give up their newborns for adoption. Others offer classes for the expectant mothers with prenatal care and financial planning.

There were 31 abortion providers in North Carolina in 2008, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

The abortion law currently being challenged in court requires a woman seeking an abortion to receive an ultrasound at least four hours before the procedure by a medical professional, who must put the electronic image of the fetus, describe what the woman may view and offer her the chance to listen to the fetal heart beat.

The law also requires that a woman receive abortion state-specified information at least 24 hours in advance, including the medical risks of having an abortion and giving birth.

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Online: NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina report: <http://bit.ly/okKERs>

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