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False Advertising: A Look at Crisis Pregnancy Centers

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False Advertising:

A look at crisis pregnancy centers.

Thesis documentation by Morgan Gale.

Research question:

How can the anti-abortion bias of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) be made more visible to students, and why might this bias be harmful to people seeking reproductive healthcare?

The beginning:

Since my very first semester of college, I have been deeply involved in local activism. Much of my activist work has centered around reproductive justice: advocating for comprehensive sex education, easier access to contraception, and stigma-free abortion care.

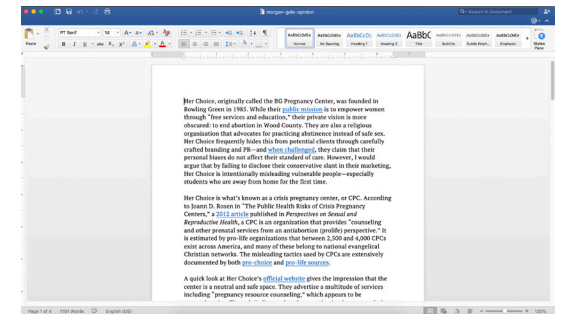
I have encountered many frustrating roadblocks during this work, but one of the most glaring has been the unchecked presence of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) in Northwest Ohio. A CPC is an anti-abortion organization that "counsels" pregnant individuals while pretending to be pro-choice, often giving out false or misleading medical information and discouraging pre-marital sex. It is difficult to raise awareness about these centers because their public image is so carefully crafted.

Before I even knew what form I wanted my project to take, I knew it needed to present solid evidence that these centers are not neutral and can actually cause harm.

Initial experiments:



01. In the beginning, I was unsure of both the direction and tone my project should take. This was partly because I struggled to define my target audience, and also because I didn't want to create something redundant. In these early stages, I revisited the fun, subversive illustrations I'd created about CPCs in my Design Theory class earlier that year to see if they could function as propaganda.

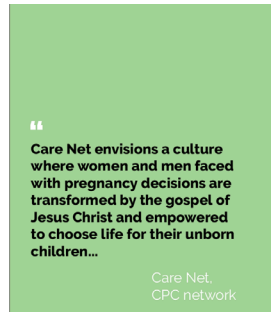


02. While I was still unsure of the visual direction of the project, I did know that I enjoyed presenting research in a written format. As a result, I wrote a 1,200-word opinion piece about the CPC across the street from campus, Her Choice, and submitted it to a local news website, *BG Independent Media*. The piece was never published, but it solidified my desire to incorporate writing into my project.



According to Joann D. Rosen in "The Public Health Risks of Crisis Pregnancy Centers", a 2012 article published in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, a crisis pregnancy center (CPC) is an organization that provides "counseling and other prenatal services from an antiabortion (prolife) perspective" (201). It is estimated by pro-life organizations that between 2,500 and 4,000 CPCs exist across America, and many of these belong to national evangelical Christian networks (201). A 2006 study cited in Rosen's article found that 87 percent of CPCs contacted provided false or misleading medical information.

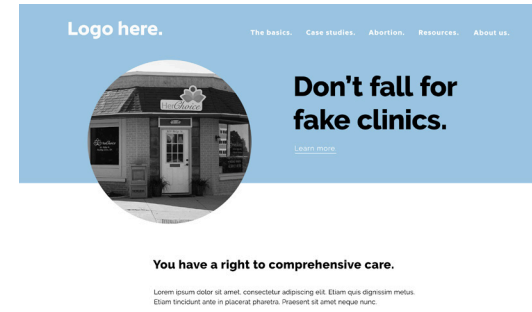
03. I began to translate my research into a small, digestible, educational booklet about CPCs that could be guerrilla-dropped around campus.



04. I also designed a companion booklet specifically about Her Choice. My plan at this stage was to create a booklet about each CPC in both Bowling Green and Toledo, which could be distributed at different locations across campuses in both cities.

What does Her Choice do?

Her Choice, originally the BG Pregnancy Center, was founded in Bowling Green in 1985. While their public mission is to empower women through free services and education, their private vision is to end abortion in Wood County. Her Choice hides this from potential clients through carefully crafted branding and PR, but Care Net—a network of pro-life Christian pregnancy centers—lists them as an affiliate, and they frequently collect donations from anti-abortion events, such as an annual Walk for Life. Additionally, their (now deleted) website for volunteer recruitment declares abortion "a tragedy and heartbreaking to God". Yet, Her Choice continues to advertise itself as unbiased care.



05. To accompany the booklets, I designed a website that would compile all the information in one place. The project utilized soft colors reminiscent of healthcare materials in order to seem inviting, friendly, and official. At this point, I was still unsure of my target audience and wanted to avoid being too bold.



06. At some point during this process, it occurred to me that I should actually visit a CPC. I wanted to know how clients were treated, what materials were distributed, and how these things differed from the organization's public face. Therefore, my final experiment of the summer became...

Going undercover:

Because my face is too recognizable in Bowling Green (thanks to my previous activism regarding Her Choice), I made an appointment for a pregnancy test at a CPC further north: The Pregnancy Center of Greater Toledo. This CPC presented itself very deceptively online, claiming to provide information about abortion without mentioning that it isn't actually a medical facility.

I recorded audio on my phone during the appointment and also took home a sample of materials provided in the consultation room. The atmosphere was friendly, but the woman who spoke with me referred to my potential pregnancy as "the baby," and despite the test coming back negative, she discouraged me from having an abortion if I *did* turn out to be pregnant, because I might miscarry anyway and it would be a waste of money. The reading materials were produced by anti-abortion groups like Focus on the Family, and the *Before You Decide* magazine that was given to me referred to birth control as abortion-inducing. The materials also discouraged sex before marriage.

find forgiveness

HerChoice
419.354.4673

HOW SAFE IS SEX?

ADOPTION

Your pregnancy ends with giving life. You may feel good and positive about your choice. You will remember giving birth. You will have plenty of time to plan your and your baby's future. You can hold, name, and love your baby. You can have continued contact with your child.

ABORTION

Your pregnancy ends with death. You may feel guilt and shame about your choice. Abortion is final; you can't reverse your decision. You will never know or treasure your baby. You will miss the opportunity to see your child develop.

Differences

Differences

Check the reverse side for important similarities between adoption and abortion. Remember that adoption goes a step beyond choosing life for your baby. It is a quality of life decision for you and your child. Life Cycle Books (800) 214-5849 www.life-cyclebooks.com © Bethany, 2000 Printed in Canada Item #509

BEFORE YOU DECIDE

Be Informed • Be Empowered • Be Strong

- 4 TRUE STORIES
- 8 PHYSICAL RISKS
- 7 SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

+ 25 Amazing Pics

You've gotta see to believe!

GENUINE ANSWERS TO YOUR REAL QUESTIONS



- DO I KNOW MY OWN BODY?
- WHAT IF I DIDN'T CHOOSE THIS?
- IS IT SAFE?
- I JUST HAD UNPROTECTED SEX... NOW WHAT?

FOCUS ON FAMILY

the first 9 MONTHS

RU SURE?
GET THE FACTS FIRST

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW TO MAKE YOUR BEST CHOICE TODAY

64youdecide.org

healing the hurt

by Teri K. Reisser, M.S., M.F.T. and Paul C. Reisser, M.D.

Find Out for sure

the pregnancy center
Get Answers. Find Hope.

This is not your only choice

PLEASE READ THIS

"I might consider adoption if . . ."

by Julie Stobbe

the morning-after pill

BEFORE YOU DECIDE
WOULD I KNOW?
ABORTION

PHYSICAL ABORTIONS

Mifeprex, Mifepristone, RU-486

allow mifepristone pills, eventually causes embryo's death
misoprostol, cramping expels baby
follow up with provider to check if abortion is complete
Dizziness • Headaches • Diarrhea
Severe cramping • Fever & Chills • Vomiting
embryonic parts expelled if you are beyond 8 weeks LMP
miscarriages fail to abort
miscarriages that continue; misoprostol may cause birth defects
women need a dilation & curettage to stop hemorrhaging
avoid ectopic pregnancy
life-threatening infection

SURGICAL ABORTIONS

ASPIRATION Suction

WHEN Up to 13 weeks LMP

HOW Cervix sometimes softened using laminaria or vaginal medication the night before
Local anesthetic injected in cervix
Cervix stretched open using metal dilating rods
Plastic tube inserted in the uterus & connected to an electric or manual vacuum device that pulls the fetus's body apart & out out of the uterus
A curette may also be used to scrape any remaining fetal parts
Removed tissue examined to verify completeness

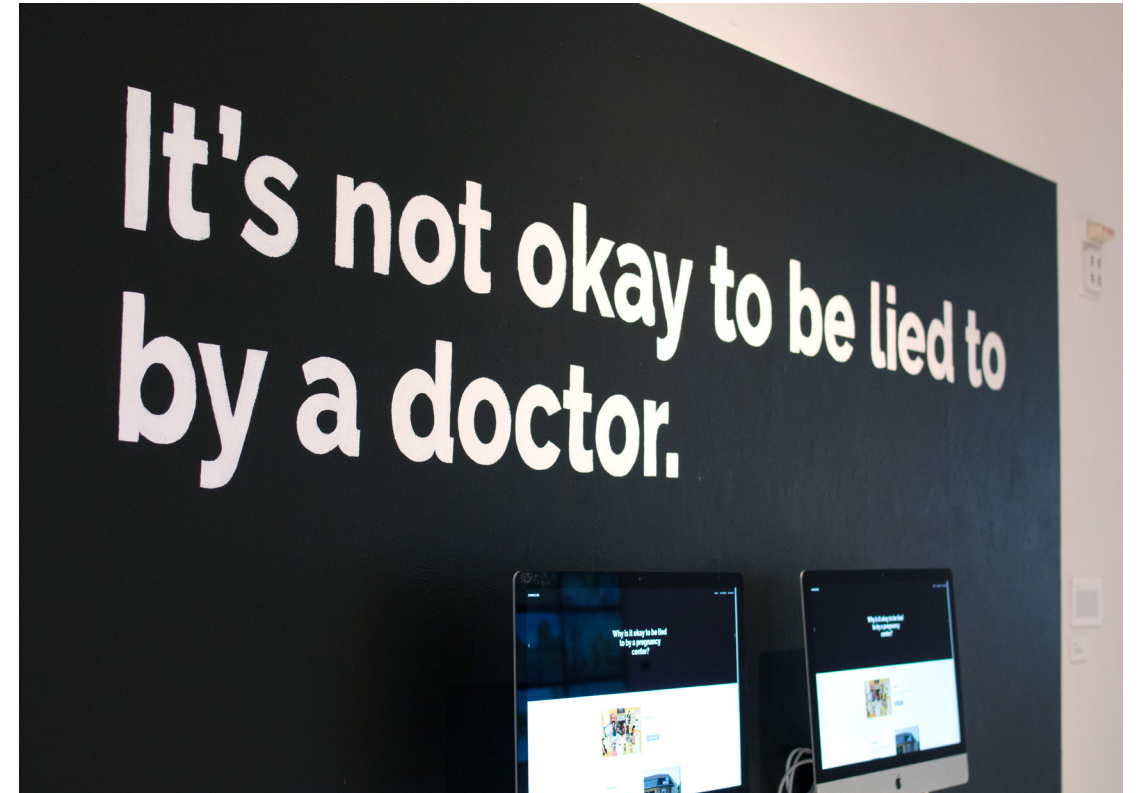
RISKS Serious physical complications are infrequent
Bleeding, infection, and incomplete abortion
Allergic reaction to meds

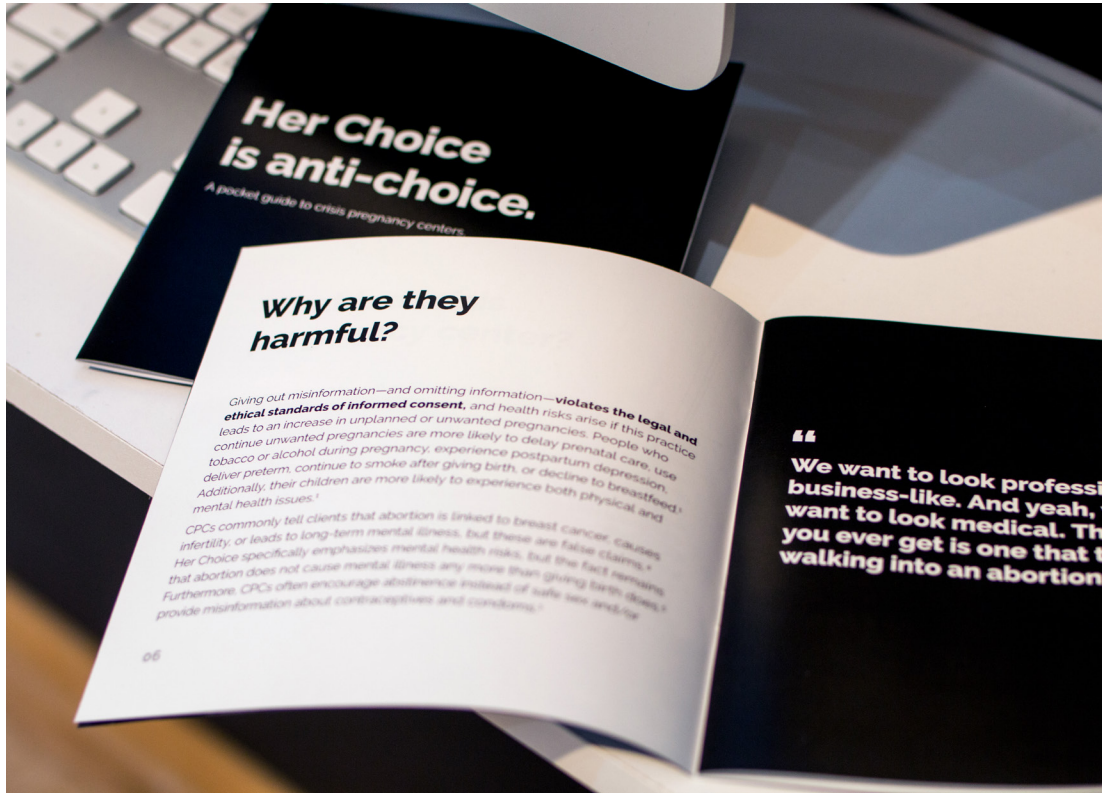
The project:

After poring over my research for a very long time, I decided to switch gears from vaguely medical to explicitly political. I boiled down all of my ideas into a website, a booklet, and a gallery installation, and I stripped back all of the colors to black and white.



Installation: Interactive website and booklets in the Dorothy Uber-Bryan Gallery.





Booklet: In-depth case study about Her Choice for gallery visitors to take home.



Website: Research for gallery visitors to read or look up at home.

CHOICE BG

About Case Study Resources

Why is it okay to be lied to by a pregnancy center?



About.

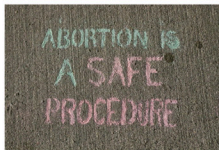
Find out what crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) do and how to identify them.

LEARN MORE

Case Study.

In Bowling Green, Her Choice misleads students about reproductive healthcare.

LEARN MORE



Resources.

Want more in-depth information about CPCs or need to get an abortion?

FIND OUT HOW

CHOICE BG

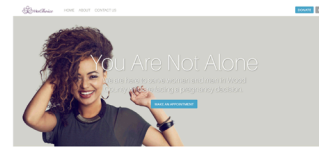
About Case Study Resources

What is a crisis pregnancy center?

The Problem

Her Choice, originally called the BG Pregnancy Center, was founded in Bowling Green in 1985. While their [public mission](#) is to empower women through "free services and education," their private vision is more obscured: to end abortion in Wood County. They are also a religious organization that advocates for practicing abstinence instead of safe sex. Her Choice frequently hides this from potential clients through carefully crafted branding and PR and [video testimonials](#); they claim that their personnel biases do not affect their standard of care. However, by failing to disclose their conservative slant in their marketing, Her Choice is intentionally misleading vulnerable people—especially students who are away from home for the first time.

Her Choice is what's known as a **crisis pregnancy center**, or CPC. According to Joann D. Rosen in "The Public Health Risks of Crisis Pregnancy Centers," a [2012 article](#) published in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, a CPC is an organization that provides "counseling and other prenatal services from an antiabortion (pro-life) perspective." It is estimated by pro-life organizations that between 2,500 and 4,000 CPCs exist across America, and many of these belong to national evangelical-Christian networks. The misleading tactics used by CPCs are extensively documented by both [pro-choice](#) and [pro-life advocates](#). Perhaps most troubling is the fact that in the majority of states, CPCs outnumber licensed clinics that offer the full range of healthcare options.



Her Choice website homepage as of 2018.

A quick look at Her Choice's [social media](#) gives the impression that the center is a neutral and safe space. They advertise a multitude of services including "pregnancy resource counseling," which appears to be comprehensive. The only indicator that the organization is not pro-choice is a subtle disclaimer that they "do not provide or refer for abortions." There is also no clear disclosure that they are a religious organization. Similarly, the materials they give to students at BGSU's annual Campus Fest make no mention of their pro-life stance. [Her Choice has stated](#) that their religious affiliation is disclosed on their client intake form, but that is far too late.

The Impact

So what harm is posed by CPCs like Her Choice?

A [2008 government study](#) cited in Rosen's article found that **87 percent of CPCs contacted provided false or misleading medical information**: the most common trends were telling women that abortion is linked to breast cancer, that abortion "can make it difficult to become pregnant in the future", and that abortion leads to long-term mental health issues like depression. These are all inaccurate claims. Her Choice specifically emphasizes mental health and advisories services for those "struggling" after an abortion, but the fact remains that abortion does not cause long-term mental illness any more than giving birth does. According to a [2019 study](#) in *American Psychologist*, the risk of mental health issues among adult women who have a single, legal, first-trimester abortion is no greater than the risk among those who deliver an unwanted pregnancy. Additionally, a [2015 study](#) by the UCSF School of Medicine found that 98 percent of people do not regret their abortion.



"Abortion is a SAFE Procedure" written in chalk on the sidewalk in front of Her Choice by protesters.

Furthermore, according to Rosen, CPCs are known to provide misinformation about contraceptives and condoms, if any information is provided at all. "The majority of teenagers who visit clinics to get a pregnancy test are not pregnant," says Rosen. "However, some of them are engaging in high-risk sexual behavior and are at significant risk of contracting STDs and of becoming pregnant... When informing clients of a negative pregnancy test, community clinics have a brief window in which to provide contraceptive information and STD counseling to a population in need of those services. From a public health perspective, as others have also noted, the failure to take advantage of this window is a crucial missed opportunity." [Numerous studies have found](#) that abstinence-only education is not an effective method of preventing teen pregnancy; therefore, by encouraging teens to stay away from sex, Her Choice fails to serve the Bowling Green population.

Giving out misinformation—and omitting information—violates the legal and ethical standards of informed consent. Health risks arise if the information given out by CPCs like Her Choice leads to an increase in unplanned or unwanted pregnancies. It is well-documented that people who continue unwanted pregnancies are more likely to delay prenatal care, use tobacco or alcohol during pregnancy, experience postpartum depression, deliver preterm, continue to smoke after giving birth, or decline to breastfeed. Additionally, their children are more likely to experience both physical and mental health issues.

It is vitally important to give pregnant individuals accurate, comprehensive, and judgment-free information about every option, including abortion, and to advertise reproductive services honestly. By failing to do so, CPCs like Her Choice put vulnerable populations at risk.

Conclusions:

Art is an important form of activism. Thoughtful design can make a complicated concept more accessible and spur an audience to action.

Future endeavors should involve more campus outreach and/or a social media campaign to maximize impact.

Her Choice is anti-choice.

A pocket guide to crisis pregnancy centers.

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What is a crisis pregnancy center?



According to Joann D. Rosen in "The Public Health Risks of Crisis Pregnancy Centers", a 2012 article published in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, a crisis pregnancy center (CPC) is an organization that provides "counseling and other prenatal services from an **antiabortion (prolife)** perspective".¹ It is estimated by pro-life organizations that between 2,500 and 4,000 CPCs exist across America, and many of these belong to national evangelical Christian networks such as Care Net, Heartbeat International, and the National Institute of Family and Life Advocates (NIFLA).¹ The misleading tactics used by CPCs are extensively documented by both pro-choice and pro-life sources.^{2,3} A 2006 government study cited in Rosen's article found that **87 percent of CPCs contacted provided false or misleading medical information**.⁴ Perhaps most troubling is that in the majority of states, CPCs outnumber licensed reproductive health clinics and go out of their way to hide their religious slant.²

Why are they harmful?

Giving out misinformation—and omitting information—**violates the legal and ethical standards of informed consent**, and health risks arise if this practice leads to an increase in unplanned or unwanted pregnancies. People who continue unwanted pregnancies are more likely to delay prenatal care, use tobacco or alcohol during pregnancy, experience postpartum depression, deliver preterm, continue to smoke after giving birth, or decline to breastfeed.¹ Additionally, their children are more likely to experience both physical and mental health issues.¹

CPCs commonly tell clients that abortion is linked to breast cancer, causes infertility, or leads to long-term mental illness, but these are false claims.⁴ Her Choice specifically emphasizes mental health risks, but the fact remains that abortion does not cause mental illness any more than giving birth does.⁵ Furthermore, CPCs often encourage abstinence instead of safe sex and/or provide misinformation about contraceptives and condoms.¹

“

We want to look professional... business-like. And yeah, we do kind of want to look medical. The best client you ever get is one that thinks they're walking into an abortion clinic.

Abby Johnson,
pro-life activist⁶

“

Care Net envisions a culture where women and men faced with pregnancy decisions are transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and empowered to choose life for their unborn children and abundant life for their families.

Care Net,
national CPC network⁷

What does Her Choice do?

Her Choice, originally the BG Pregnancy Center, was founded in Bowling Green in 1985.⁸ While their public mission is to empower women through free services and education, **their private vision is to end abortion in Wood County.**⁹ Her Choice hides this from potential clients through carefully crafted branding and PR, but Care Net—a network of pro-life Christian pregnancy centers—lists them as an affiliate, and they collect donations from anti-abortion events, such as their annual Life Changes Everything walk.^{10,11} Additionally, their (now deleted) website for volunteer recruitment declares abortion “a tragedy and heartbreaking to God”.⁹ Yet, Her Choice continues to advertise unbiased care to college students and only discloses their religious affiliation on their client intake form, which is far too late.¹² By failing to state their anti-abortion mission on public materials, Her Choice intentionally misleads vulnerable people—especially students who are away from home for the first time.

What evidence is there?

When confronted by protesters and journalists, Her Choice maintains that the personal opinions of their staff have no influence on their work.¹³ However, the website **bgpcfriends.org** was used by Her Choice to recruit volunteers until it was deleted in 2017 and contained anti-abortion statements such as the following:

- "In Bowling Green, babies are being lost to abortion before they experience their first breath of life."
- "We do our best ... to keep active with marketing that will ensure that these [pregnant] women have heard of our center and prayerfully turn to us instead of an abortion clinic."
- "We need your help to fight for life, to stand against abortion and help women in need. Help us increase awareness in Wood County about the occurrence of abortion and its devastating effects on women."

BE A PARTNER IN ENDING ABORTION IN BOWLING GREEN

About 1,200 abortions take place in our area each year. We need your help to fight for life – to stand against abortion and help women in need. Help us increase awareness in Wood County about the occurrence of abortion and its devastating effects on women.

We're Looking for Women Who Are Considering Abortion

We want to reach women considering abortion before they make a decision to end their pregnancies. Through targeted marketing and outreach to women in crisis, we promote key services we have available – free pregnancy tests and limited ultrasounds.

The Difference We've Made

The BGPC has stood as a place of hope in our community for over 30 years, helping thousands of women in crisis because of an unplanned pregnancy. We have a dynamic staff and devoted volunteers. Our RN's and sonographers provide excellent medical services to our clients. Volunteers are trained as client advocates and as teachers for our educational programs. With donations from the community, we are able to provide some material needs for our clients – diapers, baby clothing, maternity clothes, etc. Our aim is to provide compassion, care and service to each person that walks through our doors. Our facility is open to walk-in clients 5 days a week.

HOME

DONATE ▾

WHY THE BGPC ▾

PROGRAMS ▾

EVENTS ▾

GET INVOLVED

ABOUT ▾

In Bowling Green, babies are being lost to abortion before they experience their first breath of life. This is a tragedy and heartbreaking to God. Our culture has pervaded our society with the misinformation that having an abortion is simply removing tissue. The BGPC is in the business of giving these often frightened young people the right information about their pregnancies, and solutions to the problems they may have associated with an unexpected pregnancy. God is offering hope through the BGPC.

ABORTION IS NEAR

1.2 million abortions occur in our country in every year. That is 1 abortion every 20 seconds. In Ohio, more than 23,000 abortions occur each year. About 1,200 occur in Northwest Ohio. The Bowling Green Pregnancy Center was founded in 1985 to offer help and hope to women considering abortion. The Center is a place of information and truth. Women find hope, support and most of all, the love of Christ.

Reach Them

There are hundreds of women in this area searching the internet for a place to have an abortion. They are frightened and often alone. They are determined to get rid of their "problem" as fast as possible. When they call our center and we answer the phone with a cheerful voice and love in our hearts, God can reach out to them through us. Our client advocates show no judgement; only love and concern. In this way, we can let a young woman know that we are going to help her and her baby in any way we can. We show our client that her situation may be difficult but we can empower her to make the right decisions for herself and her baby's health, physically and emotionally.

Show Them

When a woman comes into the Bowling Green Pregnancy Center we perform a pregnancy test. If it turns out positive, we give her factual information about the baby she's carrying, and also about abortion. We try and assess her personal situation as much as we can, and ask if we can pray for her. We schedule a free ultrasound with our medical team allowing her to see her unborn baby. This very often results in a decision to carry her baby.



Furthermore, in a 2016 newsletter, Executive Director Shelly Burkhart elaborates on the purpose of renaming the BG Pregnancy Center to Her Choice.¹⁴ "Our mission is to reach abortion minded (AM) clients to equip them to choose life," she states. "After doing some research of AM clients, we discovered that women seeking abortions are less likely to visit a center with the word 'pregnancy' in its title. With this finding, we have chosen to change up our marketing strategy. While we will remain The Bowling Green Pregnancy Center, our 'tagline' will be HerChoice. **We are reclaiming the word choice, because it's God's word to begin with! This is what we will use when dealing with clients.** I assure you, our Christ centered focus remains."

Additionally, Her Choice receives training from extremist organizations like Created Equal, a group that brings a Jumbotron and images of aborted fetuses to BGSU's campus every fall.^{15,16} The slide shown in the photo to the right reads, "Frame the Debate: Would you kill a born person because of their circumstances?"



Created Equal

@CreatedEqual

Home

About

Events

Photos

Videos

Community

Posts

What is Created Equal?

Make Your Contribution

Info and Ads

Like

Following

+ Create Fundraiser

...



Created Equal

November 14, 2018 ·

"People need to see this before they get to the clinics." -Her Choice staff member.

Ian gives a training to Her Choice Pregnancy Center in Toledo, Ohio. It is critical that all arms of the pro-life movement are working together. We need activists changing hearts on abortion before individuals ever face unplanned pregnancies and we need centers dedicated to serving women currently in those pregnancies and ministering to post-abortive parents.



15

3 Shares

PROMISING STATISTICS

A recent study released by the Centers for Disease Control indicated most teens are not having sex. 72.5% of teens ages 15–17 have never had sexual intercourse.

Of teens who have had sex 2/3 say they wish they had waited.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

t C Won't Condoms Protect Me?

Here's what the Centers for Disease Control says:

Women - Condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can **reduce** the risk of transmission of **chlamydia**.^{1,17}

Men - Condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can **reduce** the risk of transmission of **gonorrhea**.^{2,17}

Women - Genital ulcer diseases **can occur** in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, as well as in areas that are not covered. Correct and consistent use of latex condoms can **reduce** the risk of **syphilis**, as well as **genital herpes** and **chancroid**, **only** when the infected area or site of potential exposure is protected.^{3,4,18,19}

Both - Condoms **may lower** the risk of **HPV**, if used all the time and the right way.^{5,19}

Men - Condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can **reduce** the risk of transmission of **trichomoniasis**.⁶

Women - Condoms were found to **reduce** the risk of **HIV** transmission during vaginal sex by 85% when used consistently and correctly (following the directions exactly and using them at every occurrence of sex, without exception).^{8,9,18}

Men - Using condoms 100% of the time still leaves a 15% risk of HIV infection compared to not using condoms at all. HIV is the virus that without treatment causes AIDS.

Women - **You can be infected with any STD even when using condoms 100% of the time.**

Men - Are you looking for complete protection from STDs and Pregnancy, guaranteed 100% of the time?

The only guaranteed way to avoid pregnancy or infection with a sexually transmitted disease is to practice sexual abstinence (abstain from any sexual contact) while single. If you marry, select a partner who is not infected with an STD and remain sexually faithful during marriage.

All other methods leave you at risk.

It would make sense for a pregnancy resource center to provide information about safe sex and birth control, thereby reducing the chances of unintended pregnancies and abortions. **Her Choice, however, takes an abstinence-only approach.** One pamphlet handed out at BGSU's annual Campus Fest in 2017, titled "Your Sexual Exposure" and published by the anti-abortion organization Heritage House, emphasizes the failure rate of condoms and encourages readers to save sex until marriage.^{17,18} The publisher states on their website that "chastity and abstinence" will help to end abortion.¹⁸ Furthermore, Her Choice shares images on their Facebook page encouraging teens to refrain from sex.^{19,20}

Numerous studies conclude that abstinence-only education is not effective at preventing teen pregnancy.²¹ In fact, national data from all U.S. states shows that abstinence education correlates with **higher** rates of teen pregnancy.²² Community clinics like Her Choice could provide education about birth control methods to "a population in need of these services," according to Rosen, but they fail to meet this need.¹

How do I spot a CPC?

Your local clinic may be a crisis pregnancy center if it...

- Markets free ultrasounds, pregnancy tests, and “abortion counseling”.
- Deflects questions about what services it offers.
- States on its website—often in small print—that it does not provide or refer for abortions.
- Makes remarks discrediting medical institutions like Planned Parenthood by claiming that real clinics will mislead you and “profit” from your decision to have an abortion.
- Talks about fetal development in a way that humanizes the fetus—saying “your baby” or “your child”, emphasizing trivia (like when the fetus develops fingerprints or sucks its thumb), handing out physical models of the fetus that may or may not be accurate, etc.
- Refers to a client during an ultrasound as a “mother” or “mommy”.

- Gives out pamphlets or other literature published by anti-abortion organizations like Heritage House or Focus on the Family, many of which push religious values like saving sex until marriage.
- Emphasizes abstinence as the only way to avoid pregnancy and STIs.
- Emphasizes health risks of abortion despite it having extremely low rates of complications.^{23,24,25}
- Cites false information about abortion, such as myths that abortion causes breast cancer or future miscarriage.⁴
- Tries to push clients past the legal limit for abortion by giving inaccurate due dates, convincing them to wait and see if they miscarry, etc.⁶
- Is located near a comprehensive clinic that offers abortion, or chooses a name similar to a comprehensive clinic’s.
- Is affiliated with a larger network (Care Net, NIFLA, etc.) or a local church.

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