

SUBMISSION TO
INQUIRY INTO TRANSPARENT ADVERTISING AND NOTIFICATION OF PREGNANCY
COUNSELLING SERVICES BILL

(sent via an attached document to community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au)

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**Senate Community Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra, 2600
Australian Capital Territory**

Monday, 19 June 2006

Dear Senators:

A copy of the community's petition calling on Senators to regulate pregnancy counselling and to ensure that Government-funded counsellors provide objective and truthful information about all available pregnancy options is attached separately. This petition has been facilitated by GetUp.org.au, an independent not-for-profit online community organisation, and has been signed by over 13,000 Australians.

The petition reflects concern among the public regarding the lack of regulation of the pregnancy counselling industry, the ensuing potential for harm and the absence of rigour and transparency surrounding the selection of organisations receiving Federal Government funding for providing these services.

The concern is that many organisations currently offering counselling do not openly disclose their anti-abortion agenda in their advertising, literature or website - effectively 'ambushing' and misleading women who seek neutral non-directive help and information. Whether or not these groups charge for their information is irrelevant to their potential to cause harm. To compound this deception, some anti-abortion groups have been able to list a 24-hour emergency helpline in the Emergency and Community Help section of the white pages, without being required to disclose their anti-abortion views. People trust and assume that the helplines listed in this section of the phone book are legitimate avenues for obtaining unbiased help and information about all available pregnancy options, and exist to assist women, along with their partners and families, in making a fully-informed personal choice during a period of vulnerability and distress.

During our campaign two organisations were identified which illustrate the urgent need for legislation to regulate pregnancy counsellors. The Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (AFPSS), formerly called The Australian Federation of Pro-Life Pregnancy Support Services, is a peak body for 29 "*pregnancy support services*" across Australia. The AFPSS trades under the name Pregnancy Help Australia, and coordinates a 24-hour a day, 7 day a week 1300 helpline listed in the Community Help section of the white pages.

The AFPSS has received \$1,163,684 in Government funding since 1999¹ and \$300,000 this year for the Helpline. According to their service charter "*Pregnancy Help Australia provides free, non-directive counselling*" and "*support to individual agencies which offer positive choices for pregnant women.*" Nowhere in their advertising, service charter, or on the Pregnancy Help Australia website does it state, or even suggest, that these groups are anti-abortion.

The bias of the AFPSS is clear to see however by viewing the website of the American group Heartbeat International (a link - without explanation - appears on the Pregnancy Help Australia website) which describes itself as "*one of the first and largest pro-life networks of pregnancy centers in the world...*" and which clearly proclaims its anti-abortion and Christian motivation and mission. The following appears on the Heartbeat International website.

¹ Figures cited by Reproductive Choice Australia from Dept Health and Ageing.

Australian Government Awards Grant to Heartbeat Affiliate

Australian Health Minister Tony Abbott recently announced that the Australian government would provide \$300,000 grants to organizations that provide life-affirming alternatives to abortion. ...

We are pleased to report that one of the organizations receiving funding is a Heartbeat International affiliate! The Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (AFPSS) will receive funding to support their national telephone counseling line.²

GetUp was also able to obtain a copy of the AFPSS' constitution, which clearly states the Federation's and its subscribing organisations' commitment "*not to advise, provide or refer, directly or indirectly for abortion or abortifacients*".

The other service provider discussed in our campaign is Pregnancy Counselling Australia. This Victorian group distributed a poster to GPs and health clinics advertising their 24-hour 1300 number, and offering "*free confidential compassionate counselling*", along with a letter requesting that the GP display the poster. Neither the letter or poster hint at the group's anti-abortion views. The poster appears neutral, and is cleverly designed to appeal strongly to a woman undergoing emotional turmoil and seeking help.

Once again, nowhere on Pregnancy Counselling Australia's website does it state that this group is anti-abortion or that they pursue an ideological, rather than medical agenda. Under the heading "*What are your alternatives?*" the website lists only two, "*continuing the pregnancy*" and "*adoption*". There is a lengthy section devoted to "*Considering an abortion?*" which contains descriptions of many severe medical, psychological and '*spiritual*' effects of abortion with no accompanying statistical information, medical facts or citations of credible research which may place this 'information' into a realistic perspective. The website refers repeatedly to "Post Abortion Syndrome", a 'disorder' which does not appear in the DSM-IV diagnostic manual, and which has received no scientific support in any credible forum. Several US studies have attempted to find support for its existence and instead found evidence to the contrary, yet this 'disorder' continues to be treated as scientific and medical fact in the literature published by anti-abortion organisations such as Pregnancy Counselling Australia.

On the other hand, a woman ready and wanting to become a parent would hardly tolerate pressure to have a termination on grounds that having a baby causes risk of post-natal depression. The point being, those in public service occupations such as mental health care have no right to misrepresent their qualifications and services for the sake of a personal, religious, or political agenda of any kind.

The clear messages for the Senate from this petition, and from the feedback and discussion during GetUp's campaign are as follows:

- **The clear need for a rigorous and transparent national regulatory system be established for pregnancy counsellors;**
- **The community's expectation that publicly-funded pregnancy counselling organisations are held to high standards by the Government;**
- **That publicly-funded service providers offer truthful and unbiased information on all pregnancy-related questions;**
- **That these regulations and the conditions for eligibility of public funding be transparent and evenly applied.**

² http://www.heartbeatinternational.org/international_focus.htm

Many in the community have expressed their alarm and disappointment at the lack of existing protections from false advertising and misleading information, especially for a service as important as counselling.

Counselling should be required to be free from ideological or other bias, non-emotive, medically and scientifically accurate, presented in context, and should factually canvass all three options available to a pregnant woman including motherhood, adoption and termination.

In order for women, along with their partners and families, to be able to exercise informed choice, groups providing counselling, whether Government-funded or not, must cease to engage in false and misleading advertising. At a minimum, they must be required to clearly indicate any ideological bias, and that of their affiliates, in their advertising, on their website, in their literature and particularly at the point of first contact such as the white pages. (For example an unambiguous statement that they will not refer for termination, and that their counselling is to discuss alternatives to abortion only.)

Service providers receiving public funds, and the individual counsellors within those organisations, should be required to attain professionally acceptable standards of training, ethics and impartiality. These competencies should be externally verified by an accredited and reputable body if an organisation is to qualify for Government funding.

It is clear that at this point in time that much of the free information and counselling being offered at the taxpayer's expense or otherwise does not meet these fundamental expectations. In short, many in the community feel strongly that the standards of accountability and transparency that should operate when taxpayer's money is being distributed are being subsumed by an agenda that is anti-abortion and anti-choice. If the Government's goal in its funding of the AFPSS is a lowering of the abortion rate, let them be respectfully reminded that there are ethical, positive and respectful ways to promote a reduction in the occurrence of unplanned pregnancies – educative strategies which also place due emphasis on men's role in conception. But the failure of the Government to direct and control its funding to provide genuinely informed choice to women at a difficult time in their life represents a clear risk to women's health and wellbeing.

For the reasons outlined above GetUp would encourage the Senate Committee to recommend that the Inquiry into Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005 be passed.

This GetUp submission reflects the view of over 13,000 Australians, and is likely the perspective of hundreds of thousands more who are unaware of the lack of current regulation of pregnancy counselling, or the resulting Senate Inquiry. We would therefore welcome the opportunity to present these views to an oral hearing of the Senate Inquiry in Sydney.

Thank you for your consideration in receiving this submission.

Sincerely,

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