

YWCA Australia Submission to the Community Affairs Legislation Committee of the Australian Senate re the Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Bill 2005

Executive Summary:

YWCA Australia strongly supports the intent and provisions of the *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Bill 2005*. YWCA Australia believes that the Bill will provide better regulation of pregnancy counselling services and that these services to women will consequently improve.

YWCA Australia promotes the rights of women to unbiased, objective and accurate information in a supportive and professional environment. We are concerned with reports that some pregnancy counselling services are not transparent resulting in inaccurate information that can diminish the capacity of women to make a well-informed decision.

We are also concerned at reports that some phone services have unadvertised links to religious and Right to Life advocacy organisations, and that anecdotal evidence suggests that young women are treated unprofessionally by counsellors at some of these services.

YWCA Australia strongly promotes the rights of women to safe and accessible health care. Transparent and professional services are extremely important during the often emotive and difficult experience of an unplanned pregnancy. YWCA Australia supports the *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Bill 2005* in the interests of providing the best services to women and their families

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1. Background:

The YWCA Australia is a national women's organisation with 14 Local Associations in all states and territories of Australia. Each year our services support over a quarter of a million women, men and children in Australia.

2. Discussion:

The YWCA of Australia strongly supports the intent and provisions of this Bill. The *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Bill 2005* will serve to provide better regulation of pregnancy counselling services that advertise in the Health and Help pages of every telephone directory in Australia.

The YWCA of Australia supports and defends women's right to birth control, including access to safe, affordable contraception and abortion and observes that there are and always will be girls and women with unwanted pregnancies and that unplanned pregnancy remains a key health issue for women in Australia.

YWCA Australia has been concerned at reports from some of our Local Associations that members of the Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (AFPSS) use false and misleading advertising that conceals their anti-choice position. They appear to offer genuinely neutral counselling and referral to all pregnancy related services, but in fact only offer their biased anti-choice views and then they refuse to refer women for a pregnancy termination regardless of her wishes. It is a matter of considerable concern that these agencies are funded by the Federal Government and received a significant increase in funding from the Federal in late 2005.

The experience of an unplanned pregnancy can be difficult for many women particularly when the pregnancy is unwanted. Unexpected pregnancies often arise due to contraceptive failure, or where contraception is not readily available to women they also arise from a variety of other situations, including rape, incest and menopause. Unexpected pregnancies which are also unwanted presents a woman or couple with three options: parenting, abortion or adoption. It is vital for the individual affected to have all these options available to them and for them to make the process of deciding whether to parent, have a termination or to place the child for adoption. Having correct, factual and up-to-date information on all of these options contributes to the woman or girl concerned making a well-informed decision.

Many women making this decision turn to the anonymity and immediacy of the telephone or the internet. The YWCA Australia has received information from some of our Local Associations that women seeking information and assistance with an unplanned pregnancy have no guarantee that the counselling and information offered will be unbiased and accurate. In fact, to our knowledge many of these young women in desperate straits will find that they are inaccurately told they cannot access abortion because it is 'too late', or 'illegal'. What they are not told is that they have called a phone service that is anti-choice and wants to obfuscate, confuse and delay their decision-making. Many of these services have unadvertised links to religious and Right to Life advocacy organisations.

A majority of those seeking pregnancy and post-termination counselling are young women. These young women, making what is most likely the biggest decision in their lives, need the truth not blame, deception and added trauma.

YWCA Australia are particularly concerned by a report from one Local Association which conveyed information from young women who had approached pregnancy help services such as Birthline,* Pregnancy Counselling Australia, Pregnancy Help Line, and Abortion Grief Counselling. They reported that that they have not received non-directive support, and have been further stressed by the failure of the counselling service to provide

information about all available pregnancy options, including accurate and appropriate information about services providing termination of pregnancy. We are aware that these agencies are members of the Australian Federation of Pregnancy Support Services (AFPSS). YWCA Australia strongly supports a mechanism to regulate the advertising of pregnancy counselling services to require that all such services advertise in a clearly transparent manner. This includes informing potential callers/clients that a service does not refer for termination of pregnancy and also to require that a telephone service provider can only list non-directive counselling services on its 24-hour health and help pages. It is these pages that women often turn to for information when first faced with an unplanned pregnancy.

When accessing the advertised post abortion trauma counselling service one young Adelaide woman reported that when she dialled the phone line seeking post termination counselling from South Australian based *Birthline* she was called “a murderer” by the ‘counsellor’. This episode has led to substantial trauma and guilt being borne by this young woman and the YWCA is aware that this has significantly affected her mental health.

The YWCA Australia is further concerned that these services may mislead their volunteers about the nature of the service they volunteer for. The YWCA Australia is deeply disturbed by a report of alleged deception extending to a young woman who donated her time and acting talents to be used in advertising for one these services¹. She has reported to us her concern that she provided her acting services *pro bono* to the organisation *Birthline* to create a television Community Service Advertisement that she was led to believe at the time was promoting a service that was pro-choice and offered all options available to young women.

She was later horrified to learn that the service she has been featured in is not only not offering young women all options available to them but instead blames and persecutes those young women who call seeking help.

4. Conclusion

The YWCA of Australia reiterates our support for the intent and provisions of the *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Bill 2005*. We urge Parliament to support women facing unplanned or unwanted pregnancies or seeking post termination counselling by providing access to professional and accurate information about these crucial decisions.

¹ *Birthline* advertisement filmed using TAFE SA volunteer cast and crew who were told they were ‘helping young women’ when they donated their services. The advertisement which portrays a 17 year old young woman walking along a beach was first aired in the mid 1990s which has been aired continuously as a CSA on free to air channels for over a decade.