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OPINION

“Pregnant in Middlebury, VT:” Fake Abortion Clinics and the Right to Accurate Information

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In the era of the Trump regime, the politically inclined are eager to fight for abortion rights and affordable, government subsidized healthcare. The battle-cry is clear: “I stand with Planned Parenthood” stickers are on the back of laptops across campus and stuck on bumpers across the country. But is it enough? Is loud, unwavering support for abortion rights all that it takes to support women nationwide? And should abortion be the focus of all of our activism and attention?

In our current class, “The Politics of Reproduction,” we were introduced to crisis pregnancy centers. A crisis pregnancy center — or CPC, for short — is a deceptive “resource” for pregnant people. These centers often situate themselves near abortion providers, sometimes buying property immediately next door or across the street. Women looking for abortion providers — and often women with appointments for abortions — will mistakenly enter CPCs, whose ambiguous logos and names suggest that they offer abortion resources. Misleading advertisements online and in print also draw women into CPCs under the false promise that they offer medical counsel.

Once inside, women are inundated with false information skewed by religious biases. CPCs are designed to dissuade women from obtaining abortions, and they will do anything to reach this goal, including providing medically inaccurate information. Amy G. Bryant, a researcher from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found that 80% of CPC websites surveyed contained false information about abortion. These falsehoods included supposed “risks” of the procedure- — increased risk of breast cancer, alcoholism and infertility, among others. The American Cancer Society disavows the link between abortion and breast cancer with the support of multiple studies. The National Health Service — the United Kingdom’s health care system — found no correlation between abortion and mental health problems or infertility. Bryant and her coauthors also found that 12 states had “Resource Directories” that they provided to women seeking abortion. Among the resources these states recommended — for abortion information and care — were CPCs.

The battle for reproductive rights must include fighting both for abortion and against CPCs. Planned Parenthood stickers are not enough. So what can a student at Middlebury College do? How can we have an impact?

In the liberal Green Mountain state, it’s easy to feel worlds away from the political agendas of political conservatives, including those who run CPCs. If you do a Google search for “pregnant in Middlebury, VT,” however, the first site to appear is the Pregnancy Resource Center of Addison County, a local CPC. Their website claims that they provide information on abortion, although the small print on the website states that “[t]his center does not

offer abortions or abortion referrals.” The website does include information on what they call “post-abortion stress,” a fictional mental disorder that the DSM — a manual used by mental health providers to classify and diagnose disorders — does not acknowledge as legitimate, and that was created by anti-abortion activists. In progressive Vermont and on our own campus, women seeking accurate information may mistakenly visit this CPC and receive false information on their reproductive options and their bodies.

Students in our course decided to take on this hypocrisy. In a series of translation projects, we are using information from course texts to create impactful projects — zines, art installations and board games, among other projects — to educate and inspire the Middlebury community. Many of us felt compelled to talk about CPCs, noting that even our most politically-conscious peers outside of the course were unaware of this insidious phenomenon. Anna Novak, a junior Geography major, devised a plan to map CPCs and abortion providers in Vermont to assist women looking for health care. I contacted every hospital and abortion clinic in the state to determine who provides abortions and the type of procedures offered. This information has been translated into an interactive map, which will be available on a website created by our peers — seniors Kelsie Hoppes, Lauren Schweppe and Kisha Karla.

This website, reproductivehealthvt.wordpress.com, serves as a guide for individuals seeking reproductive health care services in Addison County, Vermont. This website educates viewers on what a CPC is and how to spot one and debunks many of their lies and biases. In addition, the website provides information on how and where to access an abortion locally, as well as information about the procedure itself.

Our collaborative projects provide a resource that women in Vermont can use to learn about providers in Vermont, including contact information and provider location. Additionally, we hope that these projects can educate our community about the threat CPC’s pose to reproductive freedom, even in liberal Vermont. The website will be operational by December 18th. For more information on the website, as well as other projects from our course, please join us at the M Gallery on Wednesday, December 6th for student presentations.

CPCs are deceptive; they have ambiguous names and websites, and their anti-abortion foundations are not immediately clear. They are designed to mislead women and dissuade them from a safe, common medical procedure. It is no longer enough to support Planned Parenthood when it is convenient. To support all women and to support reproductive autonomy, we have to emphatically oppose and demystify crisis pregnancy centers. It’s time for Middlebury students to actively oppose CPCs, and we can start in our very own town.