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The Debate Over Abortion Gets Close to Campus



When Miranda-Max de Beer '19 heard that the local Crisis Pregnancy Center (CPC) had a booth at the Student Activities Fair, she came running with 150 flyers titled “CPCs Lie to Women.” The flyers explained that CPCs claim abortion is linked to increased risk of breast cancer, infertility, and mental health disorders — which the flyer called “blatant lies that have been disproved and rejected by the medical community.” de Beer stationed herself on the grass a few yards in front of the booth, distributing her flyers and asking anyone who approached the booth, “Do you know what a CPC is?”




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medical information...” For several days, the rallying cry against these centers appeared on chalk-boards throughout campus: “Stop lying to women.”

Across the country, CPCs come under fire from opponents for using deceptive tactics. These centers are faith-based, pro-life, and often offer false or misleading information about the risks of abortion, according to a University of Georgia [study](#). The study notes that an estimated 2500 to 4000 CPCs operate in the U.S., outnumbering abortion clinics 6-to-1. According to a [paper](#) in the American Medical Association’s Journal of Ethics, CPCs are “sometimes known as ‘pregnancy resource centers,’ ‘pregnancy care centers,’ ‘pregnancy support centers,’ or simply ‘pregnancy centers.’” Most CPCs affiliate with pro-life umbrella organizations such as Heartbeat International. For a fee, these larger organizations provide training and materials to members. “CPCs are typically faith-based organizations that provide support to pregnant women and strongly encourage them to carry their pregnancies to term...CPCs may use false and/or misleading information to encourage a woman to continue a pregnancy, even if she does not want to,” Eileen Sullivan, Communications Director for the Vermont branch of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, said via email.

The debate over CPCs is growing. The HBO late-night show Last Week Tonight with John Oliver ran an [episode](#) on CPCs, satirizing the methods of these centers. Oliver even founded a fully operational mobile center — “Vanned Parenthood,” — to show how easily one can start a CPC. In June 2018, the Supreme Court ruled in *NIFLA v. Becerra* to strike down a California law that required CPCs to provide information about public reproductive healthcare services. The [National Law Center](#) [called the decision](#) “damaging and extremely disappointing.”

Though the on-campus movement against CPCs resurfaced following the Student Activities Fair, it was conceived previously by students in Politics of Reproduction, a Gender, Sexuality, and Feminism Studies (GSFS) course taught by Dr. Carly Thomsen. In the fall of 2017, Hoppes, Isquith, and classmates created [reproductivehealthvt.com](#), a [website](#) that “aims to support women’s reproductive freedoms by targeting institutions [CPCs] that are in direct violation of them.” For example, the CPC in Middlebury details



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Isquith also wrote an [op-ed](#) for the Middlebury Campus titled “‘Pregnant in Middlebury, VT:’ Fake Abortion Clinics and the Right to Accurate Information,” explaining the nature of CPCs. Earlier that fall, Hoppes went in to the center under the pretenses of “information for a friend who...might be pregnant,” trying to learn what the center does tell women. In 2016, de Beer and Mika Morton ’19, also Politics of Reproduction alumni, created the Reproductive Justice 5k, which features signs along the route about reproductive health — including criticisms of CPCs’ methods.

The students involved in this activism have something in common: Thomsen’s class. Thomsen, however, emphasizes that she is not the force behind this movement. Although unavailable for an interview, Thomsen wrote over email that “the students are the real MVPs of the Middlebury anti-CPC effort.”

The CPC located in Middlebury, known as the Pregnancy Resource Center of Addison County, reopened in recent years. According to a December 2017 [article](#) from Pregnancy Help News, an online outlet from Heartbeat International, the center was started in 1986, but struggled to find a stable location. In 2016, however, the Middlebury center’s board of directors hired Joanie Praamsma as Executive Director, who relocated and renamed the center and began working to increase presence in the community. The organization can still be found online by its former name, “Care Net of Addison County.” “We are a pregnancy resource center, so we are an organization that provides resources, education, and support,” Praamsma said. She insists that the center makes no claims to the title of “clinic.” The CPC’s [website](#) says its mission is to “[Empower] individuals to make informed choices.”

The center offers services ranging from “pregnancy support” to classes on parenting, relationships, and life skills, according to the website. The CPC provides “Options Counseling,” saying “You deserve to know the facts and we offer evidence-based abortion information,” on the website. Although the CPC does not indicate on its website that it is pro-life, it does note, “This pregnancy center offers education about abortion. This center does not offer abortions or abortion referrals.” “The first words out of my mouth are ‘We don’t provide abortions here. But we would be happy to talk to you about what your



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tests or counseling; only 20% are seeking abortions, according to the University of Georgia study. Both online and in person, the CPC encourages women to download the “Before You Decide: Mobile” app. The app, produced by CPC umbrella organization Care Net, provides an extensive series of videos highlighting the risks of abortion procedures.

The Addison County Chamber of Commerce labels the CPC as a religious organization and the center has ties to local churches. The University of Georgia study notes that most CPCs are evangelical organizations. “We are faith based, and we do not hide that at all,” Praamsma said. “Everyone who works here shares a common Christian faith and the belief that all life is of value — born and pre-born.” However, the words “religion” or “faith” never appear on the center’s website.

The 2018 Student Activities Fair was not Praamsma’s only involvement with the college. She had a booth at the 2017 Midd Action fair, an event for non-profits to solicit student volunteers hosted by the Center for Community Engagement. (This year, the Student Activities Fair and Midd Action joined forces in a single event.) Praamsma also visited a meeting of the Newman Club, the Catholic student group on campus. According to Andrew Maritan ’20, a Newman club member, Praamsma talked about the services her center provides. “I wouldn’t have known anything about [CPCs] if I hadn’t heard from the news or other people...I would have thought it was a Planned Parenthood,” Maritan said. He noted that her message appealed to the audience. After a few minutes, he walked out.

The center is a Heartbeat International affiliate. Praamsma has travelled to Columbus, OH, to attend training sessions organized through this umbrella organization; much of the material provided by the CPC comes from Heartbeat International. For some students, this presents an issue.

“I want to at least bring people’s attention to the fact that if they’re looking for honest medical information, this is not the place to go,” Isquith said in an [interview](#) with The Campus Voice.

Politics of Reproduction alumni worry that the CPC could be harmful to individuals in the community as well. “If you’re in that situation [an unintended pregnancy], what’s the first



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For Isquith, the issue is more personal. “I grew up in Vermont, and I would drive past [a CPC]. And I always thought that was the Planned Parenthood, I thought that if I wanted birth control, that’s where I’d go,” Isquith said. “I mean they look the same as Planned Parenthood. They have ‘pregnancy testing’ and ‘pregnancy resources’ listed outside.”

Praamsma tries to distance the Middlebury center from the negative national image surrounding CPCs. “They just lumped us, sort of ‘guilty by association,’ in looking at these other centers,” Praamsma said. She has seen the Last Week Tonight episode, which uses examples of CPCs manipulating women with guilt and fear, and says that — “If that’s true” — the centers depicted in the show use an “incorrect approach.” She insists that each center is unique. “We are not providing information that is trying to coerce [women]. By giving them information, I don’t think that’s coercive.”

Isquith remains unconvinced. “Ms. Praamsma does not wish to be labeled as a CPC, and when we say ‘Hey, that’s what you are’ she says ‘No, we don’t say all of those things, we don’t do all of those things, we are a pregnancy resource, we are different,’” Isquith said. Although Praamsma defends the information distributed at the CPC, she has come under fire for distributing false information — such as insisting PASS exists. In addition, when the Middlebury CPC relocated in 2016, the center first tried to purchase the former Planned Parenthood location in town, according to Pregnancy Help News. When Planned Parenthood refused the offer, the center bought the building’s second floor. According to Sullivan, “many times...CPCs are located very close to actual reproductive health centers, which can lead to women going to the crisis pregnancy center by mistake.”

The debate over the center is far from over. Isquith and her classmates stand firm that the CPC should be banned from on-campus events. They have the support of Dr. Karin Hanta, Director of the Feminist Resource Center at Chellis House. Hanta helped word the petition. “One of the three pillars of Middlebury’s mission is a responsibility of integrity, a key guard against false information,” Hanta said. “False information is harmful to students. I don’t want students to be harmed on this campus.”

At the Center for Community Engagement, the petition is gaining traction. “We’re



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coming to the fair,” Laux said. “If we find out that the organization is providing harmful and inaccurate medical information to students, then I certainly think that we would need to take action.”

Praamsma has reached out to Hoppes and Isquith to resolve the debate. She explains the tension as confusion and misconceptions.

“That’s where I’d love to have more dialogue,” Praamsma said. “What about our website is misleading? We want to be non-judgmental, non-coercive. I can’t change what motivates us to be here, but I don’t think that’s something that we have to advertise.”

The students involved in anti-CPC activism, however, express doubts about the productivity of that kind of conversation. Hoppes said that she is unwilling to “compromise [her] values.” “It just seems like it would be talking to a wall,” de Beer said. “I don’t think it would be a productive conversation, I feel like people would probably just leave feeling frustrated and angry...” Asked whether she would change her approach, Praamsma said “I would love to have a discussion.” Praamsma later noted via email that she is “not interested in changing what she and her center do, but would welcome a discussion to help others understand what they actually do.”

The issue evokes passion in both groups, and, for the time being, neither the CPC nor the students seem willing to back down. Each has distinct goals on the Middlebury campus and within the community. While CPCs seldom face opposition from state and local governments, by reaching out to the college, the center in Middlebury has found itself dealing with unexpected resistance.

