

REGION

Mobile ultrasound latest tool in anti-abortion effort



Kimberly Regnier provides a free ultrasound in the mobile unit that the Vista-based Pregnancy Resource Center and the national nonprofit Image Clear Ultrasound operate in North County. JOHN KOSTER | For the NCT

BY PAUL SISSON
psisson@nctimes.com

Getting a sonogram used to mean visiting a doctor's office, but a North County mobile ultrasound unit is roaming where the people are and offering free ultrasounds to any pregnant woman who stops by.

The program is funded by a Vista-based nonprofit group called the Pregnancy Resource Center, in partnership with a national effort led by the nonprofit organization Image Clear Ultrasound.

See **Ultrasound, A4**

Ultrasound

Continued from Page A1

Both are Christian-led groups whose leaders say the service fits with their mission to help women in crisis pregnancies and provide them with alternatives to abortion.

In North County, the mobile unit — a large motor home with equipment and a trained ultrasound technician inside — has been available for almost two years.

It makes the rounds in several communities, accompanied by an A-frame sign that says "free pregnancy ultrasound."

Kimberly Regnier, the center's ultrasound manager, said the agency provided 191 free ultrasounds to women over the past year and that 94 percent of those women said they would choose to keep their babies.

An ultrasound uses the reflections of high-frequency sound waves to form an image of inside the body, an effective way to observe fetal growth.

Regnier said women are often surprised at the details that can be picked up by an ultrasound, even relatively early in pregnancy.

"I can't tell you how many of them are so shocked that they start crying," Regnier said.

Image Clear Ultrasound operates seven of the motor home-based clinics nationwide.

On its Web site, the organization says that "at least 80 percent of abortion-minded women change their minds when they see their unborn baby on ultrasound."

However, critics, such as officials at Planned Parenthood, say the motive behind the mobile ultrasound program makes the service suspect.

Planned Parenthood describes itself on its Web site as a trusted provider of reproductive health care and a passionate advocate for women's reproductive rights.

Vince Hall, vice president of communications with Planned Parenthood San Diego, said he considers the mobile ultrasound approach a "coercive" way of fighting abortion.

He said that the sign on the mobile unit should make it clear to women that they are not entering a medical clinic on wheels, but rather accepting services from a group created to prevent abortion.

"It's misleading and it's unethical to advertise yourself as a quasimedical resource center when your entire operation is guided by only one thing," Hall said.

Indeed, the word "abortion" is not visible to those who drive by the mobile ultrasound operation.

Making the rounds

The ultrasound unit makes regular stops at high-traffic areas throughout North County.

On Mondays, motorists might notice it at Mission Avenue and Freeman Street in Oceanside.

Tuesdays, it's in Vista at Hacienda and Emerald drives, just south of Highway 78.

On Wednesdays, it appears near the Turning Point Pregnancy Resource Center in Mira Mesa, and on Thursdays it's in San Marcos, outside Birth Choice, another Christian pregnancy counseling enterprise, on South Rancho Santa Fe Road.

Jamie Hay, executive director of the Pregnancy Resource Center, said most of the women scanned by the mobile ultrasound are "in crisis" and are considering abortion.

"Many of them think that they have no other choice, but we show them what all of their options are, including adoption and abortion," Hay said.

She said the organization's religious beliefs are not forced on any woman who wants a free ultrasound, but each is asked whether she has a religion.

Those who say they do are offered a prayer session at the end of the exam.

Hall, the Planned Parenthood official, said he does not believe that women served by the operation are given an unbiased view of their options.

He said several national studies have shown that most pregnancy resource centers nationwide skew information on the consequences of abortion.

"We just feel that women deserve to know that there are places to go, like Planned Parenthood, where they can go for bias-free, medically accurate counseling," Hall said.

Additional services

In the mobile ultrasound center, pregnancy tests are also given free, as well as literature on how abortion works.

Women are also made aware of government programs that can offer everything from free diapers to free child care so that they can stay in school, Hay said.

She said the entire approach is designed to be educational and not judgmental, regardless of outcome.

"We do have clients who still choose abortion, and we let them know that, if they do, we will be here for them afterward," Hay said.

Pregnancy Resource Center received a \$50,000 community development grant from San Diego County Supervisor Bill Horn in 2007 to help pay for the equipment and another similar size grant from a Texas-based charity.

All of its ultrasound workers are volunteers.

Hay said that most of the women who come to the mobile ultrasound vehicle are alone, or with a friend — few bring their boyfriends or husbands.

Still, when couples do come in together, the women may react with tears to the ultrasound image, while the male reaction is usually one of protectiveness, Regnier said.

She recalled one young man who came in saying he would support his girlfriend's decision either way.

"After he saw the ultrasound, he said, 'We can do this. I'm going to work more hours, and I'm going to get you on my insurance,'" she said.