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Texas Pregnancy Care Network Proves Unimpressive

BY JORDAN SMITH

After two fiscal years of funding, Texas' **Alternatives to Abortion** program remains "grossly inefficient and expensive," according to a report released Wednesday by **NARAL Pro-Choice Texas**.

In 2005, lawmakers approved a budget rider penned by Sen. **Tommy Williams**, R-The Woodlands, allowing for \$5 million over the biennium to be diverted from traditional providers of comprehensive family-planning health-care services to so-called "crisis pregnancy centers," unlicensed and unregulated groups typically funded and run by organizations that are vociferous foes of abortion. The groups provide "counseling" and "support" services to pregnant women – often steering them to other taxpayer-funded programs, like food stamps or workforce services. Indeed, in order to qualify for the funding, grantees must pledge not to "promote, refer, or perform abortions" (even though it is already illegal to use public money to provide abortions). The kitty was eventually awarded to the **Texas Pregnancy Care Network**, a nonprofit that was created in August 2005 in order to take advantage of the newly created funding stream (by four individuals without any previous experience running a nonprofit entity).

To date, the TPCN has received some \$3.6 million to administer the program – 44% of which (\$1.4 million) has been spent on administrative costs, notes the new Texas NARAL report. And although TPCN initially identified more than 200 crisis pregnancy centers across the state with whom it could contract for services, by the end of fiscal year 2007, it had signed on just 15 providers. In all, over the two fiscal years, TPCN provided services to just 3,900 women – mostly unlicensed "counseling" but no actual medical services – at a cost of about \$450 per woman served. Over the same period, family-planning providers – capable of providing actual medical services, including pregnancy counseling and prenatal health care – served 500,000 Texas women, at an average cost of \$174 per woman. At press time, TPCN Executive Director Vincent Friedewald had not responded to requests for comment.

"After two years of operation, clearly this experimental program has failed," said Sen. **Judith Zaffirini**, D-Laredo. CPCs have "failed pregnant women by neglecting to provide recommended health and social services and failed pro-life supporters by directing funds away from the health-care safety net that prevents unintended pregnancies and abortions. We need to redirect these funds to evidence-based programs that improve women's health." (To see NARAL's report, visit www.prochoicetexas.org; for more on TPCN, see "**No Real Alternative**," Jan. 26, 2007).