

Original research article

# Crisis pregnancy center websites: Information, misinformation and disinformation<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Most states with 24-h waiting periods prior to abortion provide state resource directories to women seeking abortion. Our objective was to evaluate the information on abortion provided on the websites of crisis pregnancy centers listed in these resource directories.

**Study design:** We performed a survey of the websites of crisis pregnancy centers referenced in state resource directories for pregnant women. We searched for these state-provided resource directories online. We contacted state Departments of Health and Human Services for a print copy when a directory could not be found online. The crisis pregnancy center websites were evaluated for the information provided on abortion. Standardized data collection tools were used. Descriptive statistics were generated.

**Results:** Resource directories of 12 states were procured. A total of 254 websites referring to 348 crisis pregnancy centers were identified. Overall, a total of 203/254 [80%, 95% confidence interval (CI) 75%–84%] of websites provided at least one false or misleading piece of information. The most common misleading or false information included on the websites were a declared link between abortion and mental health risks (122/254 sites; 48%, 95% CI 42%–54%), preterm birth (54/254; 21%, 95% CI 17%–27%), breast cancer (51/254; 20%, 95% CI 16%–25%) and future infertility (32/254; 13%, 95% CI 9%–17%).

**Conclusion:** Most crisis pregnancy centers listed in state resource directories for pregnant women provide misleading or false information regarding the risks of abortion. States should not list agencies that provide inaccurate information as resources in their directories.

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**Keywords:** Crisis pregnancy center; Abortion; Misinformation; Abortion restrictions

## 1. Introduction

Twenty-six states currently have laws requiring waiting periods between contacting an abortion provider and obtaining an abortion. These laws are similar across states and are often known as “Woman’s Right to Know” laws. “Woman’s Right to Know” laws prescribe that counseling be performed prior to an abortion, that women either receive a mandatory ultrasound or are offered to see an ultrasound or

hear fetal heart tones, and that women wait a specified amount of time before undergoing an abortion [1]. In most states, the mandatory preabortion counseling includes telling women that agencies offer “alternatives to abortion.” In some states, such as North Carolina, women are told that they can receive a free ultrasound or hear fetal heart tones at an agency that provides this service. These agencies are privately owned, not affiliated with hospitals and commonly known as crisis pregnancy centers.

In states with a “Woman’s Right to Know” law, women are offered written materials, including information about abortion and often a “Resource Directory” that lists services and agencies available to pregnant women seeking abortion in the state. These directories include crisis pregnancy centers in their listings. Crisis pregnancy centers are nonprofit organizations that offer free services to women facing unintended pregnancies, such as pregnancy testing, ultrasound, counseling, and baby and maternity items. Some

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<sup>☆☆</sup> Implications: Eighty percent of crisis pregnancy centers listed in state resource directories for pregnant women provide misleading or false information regarding abortion.

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promote themselves as women's health clinics, and a few imply that they offer abortion services. The tactics used by crisis pregnancy centers to dissuade women from having abortions often include providing misleading or false information about abortion [2,3]. Because crisis pregnancy centers do not provide medical care, they are not governed by the same rules and regulations that govern health clinics.

The information provided on the websites of the crisis pregnancy centers may be difficult for women to evaluate, given the extremely varied quality of information available on the Internet [4,5]. Most states provide a disclaimer that they do not specifically endorse the views of any particular agency. However, because crisis pregnancy centers are listed by a state resource directory as simply centers for "alternatives to abortion," they may be viewed by patients as sources of accurate information or as health centers.

The objective of this survey was to evaluate the medical information on abortion provided by websites of crisis pregnancy centers listed in states' resource directories for pregnant women.

## 2. Materials and methods

We developed a protocol to systematically evaluate the websites of crisis pregnancy centers listed in state-provided resource directories for women with unintended pregnancies. No institutional review board permission was required. Twenty-six states with abortion counseling and waiting period laws were identified through the Guttmacher Institute's Brief on "Abortion Counseling and Waiting Periods" (initially accessed March 12, 2012) [6]. We performed a Google search using the terms "women's resource directory," "women's right to know resource directory" and "women's right to know department of health and human services." If a directory was not available online but a phone number was available, we called and ordered the resource directory. Additionally, individual searches of state health department sites were performed using the terms "woman's right to know," "resource directory," "abortion" and "pregnancy counseling." These terms were generated by reviewing the literature to find commonly used terms for our search criteria. The *a priori* list was modified with new keywords found on the websites we searched.

We identified all agencies listed in each state directory that were listed as, or appeared to be a crisis pregnancy center, a nonprofit organization with the stated purpose of counseling women not to have an abortion. For agencies with no website listed, the web address was searched on Google using the name, city and state. We included websites of crisis pregnancy centers as well as pregnancy resource centers, pregnancy care centers or centers offering alternatives to abortion, which are other names for this type of organization. We excluded websites if they referred to a maternity home (a live-in facility for pregnant women waiting to give birth), Catholic or other religious relief

services, adoption agencies or other organization not identified as a crisis pregnancy center. Each website was reviewed independently by two authors, and data were doubly entered into a database. If a discrepancy between the two authors' entries was found, the other two authors also reviewed the website, and a consensus among the four authors was achieved.

A standardized data collection tool was used to record information from each website. Information recorded included services and information offered and the information regarding abortion on each website. We recorded whether the website had specific information on abortion or abortion methods. We also recorded whether the website described an association between abortion and specific outcomes, particularly mental health disorders, breast cancer and poor pregnancy outcomes such as infertility and preterm birth. The outcomes were chosen based on prior findings that these outcomes are often used by organizations or groups attempting to dissuade women from abortion, but are not risks supported by scientific evidence or professional organizations [1–3]. Descriptive statistics are reported, with proportions and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) where appropriate [7]. All data were analyzed using Stata 11.0 (StataCorp LP, College Station, TX, USA).

## 3. Results

Resource directories for 12 states were obtained. Online resource directories were found for Alaska, Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, West Virginia and Kansas. The state directory for Alabama was obtained by calling the state health department. Directories for the 14 remaining states with mandatory counseling or waiting period laws were not located after searching the Internet and calling the state departments of health and human services. Three states, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Ohio, had websites that stated the page could not be found. The health department in Indiana was contacted and found to have only a directory of licensed abortion providers. The health department in Kentucky was contacted by phone but had a nonworking number. Missouri, Utah and North Dakota did not have resource directories. State health departments were contacted in Arkansas, Massachusetts, Montana, Michigan, Nebraska and Mississippi. We made three phone calls to each of these state health departments but did not receive any return calls. The majority of resource directories did not include any agencies that provide abortion. The resource directories for a few states (North Carolina, South Carolina and Kansas) also included comprehensive women's health centers in their resource directory listings.

From the 12 state resource directories we found, we identified a total of 601 agencies that at first appeared to be crisis pregnancy centers. We found 456 websites for these agencies. Screening of the websites revealed that 348

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