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Biden takes on anti-abortion pregnancy centers before 2024 election

Jonathan D. Salant; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Feb. 19—WASHINGTON — In advance of the 2024 presidential election where abortion rights again will be a major issue, the Biden administration has proposed ending federal funding for centers that counsel pregnant women against having abortions.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' proposed changes to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families mentions what are called **crisis pregnancy centers** as examples of spending that likely no longer would be permitted under the program that helps low-income families.

This latest effort comes as the right to abortion has become one of the dominant political issues ever since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Roe v. Wade decision. Just last week, Pennsylvania Democrats held on to their narrow state House majority when Jim Prokopiak won an open seat in the Philadelphia suburbs and said abortion rights played a major role in his win.

"Unfortunately, this president has integrated abortion into every policy," said U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., one of the leading anti-abortion advocates in Congress. "He's the abortion president and I put exclamation points after that."

The program, a block grant that replaced Aid to Families With Dependent Children, provides funding for states to help low-income households, to help parents find jobs, and to prevent "the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies" through sex education, family planning and other programs. The states have wide latitude in how to spend the money, and some of it has been going to **crisis pregnancy centers**, including in Pennsylvania. But in proposing the new rule, HHS said any link between the centers and "preventing and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies is tenuous or non-existent."

HHS said the proposal isn't directed at any specific entity but rather is designed to ensure that states use the money to help low-income families, as required under the law.

But House Republicans see the proposal as an attack on the **crisis pregnancy centers**, and every GOP member voted last month to block HHS from moving ahead with the new rule. Similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate, but it will have a tough time passing in a chamber controlled by Democrats.

"What we're really trying to do is help pregnant women," said U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly, R-Butler. "Why wouldn't you want these pregnancy centers where people can go and get the counseling that they need and the aid that they need? They want to make it about abortion. We want to make it about prenatal care for our mothers."

HHS has received more than 7,000 comments for or against the proposal

Supporters of the proposed rule say that states shouldn't be diverting money from a program to help the poor at a time of

increased need. For every 100 Pennsylvania families living in poverty, the state provided cash assistance to just 25 in 2019-20, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a progressive research group. In 1995-96, the state helped 87 of every 100 families.

Meanwhile, the maximum payment for a single parent with two children under the age of 18 in Pennsylvania remained at \$403 a month, according to the center.

“Why are fewer and fewer families that qualify for this benefit getting it?” said Tara Murtha, director of strategic communications for the Pennsylvania-based Women’s Law Project, which supports the new rule. “Those funds are being cannibalized and diverted to other purposes.”

States also can use the funding to help parents find jobs, and to “prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies,” such as through sex education, family planning and programs to prevent pregnancies.

Some of that money has been going to **crisis pregnancy centers**. There are 156 in Pennsylvania, compared with 17 clinics that perform abortions, according to the Alliance, a coalition of organizations, including the Women’s Law Project, that back women’s rights.

Since the centers target women who already are pregnant while opposing abortion and contraceptives, “how can any of those two aspects of their business models possibly work to prevent pregnancies,” Ms. Murtha said.

The centers received \$7 million in state funding last year but Gov. Josh Shapiro cut off the money Jan. 1. The Pittsburgh City Council last July took steps to regulate what lawmakers called deceptive advertising by the centers, which bill themselves as places for pregnant women to learn parenting skills, find out about adoption, get educated in reproductive health, and be encouraged to give birth rather than go through an abortion.

They’re “an alternative for women who don’t want to abort,” said Nikki Bruni of 40 Days for Life Pittsburgh, which conducts prayer vigils over a 40-day period twice a year to pray for an end to abortion. “They feel they have to abort because they don’t have the resources they need to be able to keep their babies. They’re only aborting because they feel desperate.”

The centers provide prenatal vitamins, ultrasounds, connections to social service agencies so the women can get help, maternity clothing and diapers and clothing when their children are born, Ms. Bruni said. If they want to give their child up for adoption, they can be connected with adoption agencies, she said.

“I don’t know what [opponents] are so afraid of,” Ms. Bruni said. “If a woman goes into a pregnancy center and finds out they can’t get an abortion there, she can just leave.”

Mr. Smith said the ultrasounds often convince women to give birth.

“When moms see that, they almost always — but not always — change their minds and decide to have their babies because they know they’re not going to be a parent, they are a parent,” he said.

But the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists — which defines abortion as “essential health care” — says the **crisis pregnancy centers** are “run by people who operate unethically and with the intention to dissuade, deter, or prevent [clients] from seeking certain reproductive health care options.”

U.S. Reps. Josh Gottheimer, D-N.J., and Angie Craig, D-Minn., in urging HHS to adopt the new rule, said the women who go to the centers “receive no actual medical care, and, instead are shamed and discouraged from seeking reproductive health care services such as abortion and contraception.”

Mr. Kelly pushed back on those descriptions.

“The pregnancy centers that we have back home are the most caring people you can possibly have,” he said. “The accusation is you’re just trying to prevent a baby from being aborted. I’ll stand up for that. For a person who is pregnant, it may not be

the right time for her, but our answer to that while it may not be the right time for you, it may be the perfect blessed time for someone who wants to adopt a child.”

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