

How 'Choose Life' License Plates Fund CPCs

Crisis pregnancy centers receive funding from a number of sources. In Virginia the majority of the centers are privately funded by individual donors, religious organizations, and national CPC umbrella organizations Heartbeat International, Care Net, Birthright, and Bethany Christian Services.

These national CPC organizations provide a sophisticated support network for crisis pregnancy centers in Virginia and across the country. In addition to educational and financial resources, these major umbrella organizations help CPCs establish themselves with federal and state policymakers.

In fact, the anti-choice movement has identified CPCs as key to their strategy to end abortion: along with state legislation and federal legislation, their vision for CPCs is to serve as a third arm on the ground by planting them in communities and courting state elected officials to pass legislation supporting CPCs. Enacting 'Choose Life' license-plates programs is part of this strategy.

As Ohio Right to Life puts it in a promotional video:

"When we look at the overall strategy of ending abortion, not just in Ohio but nationwide, we have to have a strong federal strategy, a very strong state strategy, and then a local strategy to support our pregnancy centers."¹

This strategy is particularly evident in Virginia. In early 2009 prominent anti-choice Virginia Senator Ken Cuccinelli sponsored legislation to enact a 'Choose Life' license-plate program, thereby setting up a state mechanism to fund crisis pregnancy centers and lend legitimacy to their deceptive and manipulative tactics. As Cuccinelli explained the legislation:

"With the passage of this bill, Virginians can purchase the Choose Life license plate for \$25 each year, with \$15 to be divided among 40 crisis pregnancy centers around Virginia. These centers, and the volunteers that work there, are on the front lines of the fight for life – trying to help women at the very moment when they are the most vulnerable."²

¹ Ohio Right to Life, Life Talk: From Overturning Roe to Ending Abortion Permanently (2012), at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-WX_YS2YF8.

² Cuccinelli Compas. 30 March 2009. Old Virginia News. Website Accessed June 13 2013. <http://news.oldva.org/?p=899>

Choose Life License Plates Funding Stream

The 'Choose Life' license plate in Virginia costs \$25.³ Of this \$25, \$15 goes directly to a license plate funding pool regulated by Heartbeat International, located in Columbus, Ohio. After the first 1,000 plates are sold, all proceeds are sent directly to Heartbeat International from the Special Plates department of the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). The DMV also reports the total number of license plates sold each month to the Richmond Coalition for Life.⁴

At the publication of our 2010 report, exactly 1,624 license plates had been sold, totaling \$9,360 to be distributed to the Commonwealth's Heartbeat International CPCs. Since then an additional 11,477 license plates have been sold or renewed, with an additional \$213,770 distributed to Virginia's Heartbeat International CPCs. As of June 17, 2013, there are a total of 5,094 "Choose Life" license plates on Virginia roads, which have funneled \$223,130 to Heartbeat-affiliated crisis pregnancy centers in Virginia.⁵ As established by Code Section §3 of Chapter 755 of the Acts of Assembly of 2009, Virginia CPCs must technically qualify to receive funding:

These funds shall be paid annually to Heartbeat International, Inc., to be distributed in equal grants to pregnancy center locations in Virginia that are tax exempt organizations under 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and officially committed to Heartbeat International's "Our Commitment of Care" standards.⁶

However as outlined in NPCVF's 2010 investigation, these qualifications were widely ignored in practice. In 2010, NPCVF identified 38 Virginia CPCs sanctioned by Heartbeat International and therefore qualified under state law to receive license plate monies. Of these 38 centers, 26 (72percent) were found to violate Heartbeat International's purported 'Commitment of Care' standards.⁷

Nonexistent CPC Continues to Receive Funding Through the State

Also among those listed as 2010 recipients of the Virginia "Choose Life" funding stream were Mattingly Test Center and Lady Care, Inc.,⁸ two nonexistent CPCs receiving state-sponsored funding, despite providing zero of the services mandated by Virginia law.⁹

³ A standard Virginia license plate costs \$10. <<http://www.dmv.virginia.gov/exec/vehicle/splates/info.asp?idnm=CL>>.

⁴ *Choose Life Virginia*. The Richmond Coalition for Life. Website Investigation. 13 Jan. 2010. <http://www.vachoose-life.org/index.php>

⁵ *Choose Life Virginia*. The Richmond Coalition for Life. Website Investigation. 13 Jan. 2010. <http://www.vachoose-life.org/index.php>

⁶ Virginia General Assembly. *VIRGINIA ACTS OF ASSEMBLY 2009 SESSION; CHAPTER 755*. Web. 13 Jan. 2010. <<http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?091+ful+CHAP0755+pdf>>.

⁷ Full list of Heartbeat International "Commitment of Care" standards can be found online: <http://www.heartbeatinternational.org/hbi-about-us/our-commitment>

⁸ In Ashburn, VA and Chesapeake, VA respectively.

At the onset of our 12-month investigative update then, NPCVF was determined to discover if nonexistent CPCs were continuing to receive state-sponsored “Choose Life” monies. Coincidentally – as is likely due to the 2010 publication of our report and the subsequent media investigation that ensued – Heartbeat International no longer makes the list of state-funded CPCs publically available. Instead they provide a general estimate, stating online that “approximately 75 service providers that meet the general qualifications of being one of the ‘pregnancy center locations’ serving ‘pregnancy women and women who suspect they may be pregnant in Virginia.’”¹⁰

By counting the number of affiliated centers in Virginia listed in Heartbeat International’s “Worldwide Directory”¹¹ and cross-referencing this list with the number of NPCVF-verified CPCs, NARAL Pro-Choice Virginia Foundation was able to identify 28 crisis pregnancy centers believed to be receiving Virginia “Choose Life” license plate monies. Shockingly, although the Mattingly Test Center has been removed from the list of affiliated CPCs, Lady Care Inc. is still listed as a Heartbeat International affiliate in Virginia – and is presumably continuing to receive ‘Choose Life’ license plate monies.

Over the past 12 months NPCVF investigators repeatedly called the number listed for Lady Care, Inc. Upon finally receiving an answer, one investigator was told that Lady Care Inc. “does not offer services for women in the United States.”¹² This is deeply troubling, considering that Heartbeat International presumably counts Lady Care Inc. among its list of centers serving “pregnant women and women who suspect they may be pregnant in Virginia,” and an in-state presence is necessary to receive state funding under Code Section 3 of Chapter 755 of Virginia law.¹³

Furthermore, as was the case during NPCVF’s 2010 investigation, internet and phonebook searches for Lady Care Inc. resulted in unidentified and unusable addresses, phone numbers, and websites. If Virginia residents cannot locate or access this center, it is not serving the predetermined purpose of Heartbeat International’s crisis pregnancy centers. An inaccessible facility that is admittedly operating out of state should not receive license plate funding from the Commonwealth, per Virginia code.

⁹ While listed as recipients of license plate monies on both the Richmond Coalition of Life’s website and Heartbeat International’s website, neither The Mattingly Test Center in Ashburn nor Lady Care, Inc. in Chesapeake even existed as Virginia entities entitled to receive state funding, as determined by Code Section 3 of Chapter 755 of the Acts of Assembly of 2009.

¹⁰ “Choose Life License Plates.” Heartbeat International website.

<http://www.heartbeatinternational.org/connections/choose-life/virginia>

¹¹ “Worldwide Directory of Pregnancy Help.” Heartbeat International. Web. 17 June. 2013.

http://www.heartbeatinternational.org/index.php?option=com_civircrm&task=civircrm/profile/search&Itemid=555&_qf_Search_display=true&qfKey=88a858784638249fb1e6826fc93788ba_8147

¹² Telephone Investigation. 20 Feb. 2013.

¹³ “Choose Life License Plates.” Heartbeat International website.

<http://www.heartbeatinternational.org/connections/choose-life/virginia>