



ISSUE ADVISORY: Anti-abortion Extremists Escalate Attacks on Family Planning Funding, Fetal Tissue Research

**By Jan Erickson, NOW Government Relations Director
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Some of us have to pinch ourselves when rising in the morning just to make sure that we are awake and not trapped in a long-running nightmare of women's rights constantly under attack by religious, anti-woman zealots. In truth, we don't want to wake up to a world where women's clinics are burned or bombed, family planning services have come under vicious attacks, anti-abortion rhetoric has reached appalling new depths and the federal government is being threatened with a shutdown over funding of Planned Parenthood clinics. It's all just too crazy and really just plain hateful of women.

The House is expected to vote on Thursday, Sept. 17, to defund Planned Parenthood for one year unless it stops offering abortion care. Funds would be diverted to community health centers during that year. (An unrealistic and logistically impossible move, see <http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2015/09/02/planned-parenthood-community-health-centers-and-womens-health-getting-the-facts-right/print/>) The bill, sponsored by Rep. Diane Black (R-Tenn.) is the Defund Planned Parenthood Act of 2015 (H.R. 3134) with 176 co-sponsors, and is expected to pass the conservative Republican-led House.

The Senate in early August stopped a bill to totally defund Planned Parenthood through a procedural measure that failed to get 60 votes, but will soon vote on a 20-week abortion ban – as promised by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) The House is also expected to vote on another bill, H.R. 3504, the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act, Rep. Trent Franks (R-Ariz.) which would impose new legal requirements related to the provision of abortion services, in specific circumstances, which the White House says would have a chilling effect, reducing access to care. The White House has said the president would veto both bills.

As most everyone who is paying attention knows by now, the current mess has been incited by the airing of several heavily edited and misleading videos produced by a phony group, the Center for Medical Progress (CMP). The videos, filmed surreptitiously by CMP activist, David Daleiden posing as a buyer of fetal tissue, featured medical personnel from two Planned Parenthood clinics talking in blunt language about fetal tissue donation. What followed was a scripted flame-out by opponents of abortion rights and contraception in order to accuse Planned Parenthood of selling "baby parts" and breaking federal laws.

In all, there could be more than a dozen doctored videos, ten have trickled out thus far – timed to keep the extremist anti-abortion rights members of Congress agitated and activated. According to Elyse Hogue, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America, Dalieden and his crew are

out to end not only abortion, but family planning, in vitro fertilization and surrogacy. And, we would add, they intend to stop fetal tissue research -- which has saved countless lives and has great potential in the treatment of chronic and fatal diseases.

Government Shutdown over Planned Parenthood Funding – For several weeks now, abortion rights opponents in Congress have been engaged in strident demands for defunding the organization, vowing to vote against any government spending measure that includes funds for Planned Parenthood. Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) is trying to defuse the situation by urging members to wait until investigations are complete, emphasizing that shutting down the government again likely will not reflect well on Republicans. Senate Majority Leader McConnell has warned against a government shutdown.

Nonetheless, several Congressional committees are proceeding with “investigations” of Planned Parenthood and the provision of donated fetal tissue to research labs. Only two Planned Parenthood affiliates provided fetal tissue samples, donated with full consent by patients to research labs. These activities were completely legal and within the appropriate medical ethical guidelines. Planned Parenthood also submitted a detailed letter to Congress which provided background on the law and detailed fetal tissue donation procedures, assuring members that the donations were conducted properly and within the law. They also sent to members an independent forensic analysis of the videotapes which concluded that extensive editing and manipulation of the Planned Parenthood officials painted a deceptive picture.

Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee conducted their own investigation of the allegations against Planned Parenthood. In a prepared statement issued on Sept. 10, Reps. Frank Pallone (D - N.J.) and Diana DeGette (D - Colo.) said, “Over the past month, we have carefully reviewed the facts at hand and the materials provided to us as a result of the majority’s inquiry. Despite the incendiary rhetoric, we have looked strictly at the facts. We are continuing to do our due diligence, but we have found these claims to be unsubstantiated.”

A Fact-Free Congressional Hearing - On Wednesday last, the House Judiciary Committee held a hearing entitled, “Examining Horrific Abortion Practices at the Nation’s Largest Abortion Provider.” (These folks are so talented at coming up with catchy titles!) The event was one more of the conservatives’ fact-free, propaganda-heavy productions with the infamous James Bopp Jr., an arch conservative lawyer who for years has led efforts to re-criminalize abortion through personhood measures, as lead witness. Bopp, currently general counsel for National Right to Life, told the committee that the videos indicate that Planned Parenthood has broken several federal laws relating to fetal tissue. (More on James Bopp Jr. at <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/category/people/james-bopp>)

No representative from Planned Parenthood was invited to testify; nor was anyone from the Center for Medical Progress. However, witness Priscilla Smith, director of Yale Law School's Program for the Study of Reproductive Justice, testified that the CMP videos were intended to "entrap Planned Parenthood" and that there was no evidence in the misleadingly edited videos of a violation of any laws.

Committee chair Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), who seemed to be under the impression that fetal tissue is donated without the consent of the woman, also remarked that the push for abortion rights and the right to donate fetal tissue is "starting to put the mom's health as secondary." No word yet on how he reconciles his apparent concern with women's health with his party's full scale attack on Planned Parenthood, one of the largest safety-net women's healthcare providers in the country.

Fetal Tissue Research Attacked - Long-time anti-abortion rights campaigner, Rep. Trent Franks (R-Ariz.) called Planned Parenthood's actions and, by extension, fetal tissue donation and research (which, it should be noted, has been legal since 1993 when it was adopted with overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress) the "worst human rights atrocity in the history of the U.S.

Another witness, Gianna Jessen, wondered aloud in her opening statement "how many Lamborghinis have been purchased with the blood of innocent children?" This, despite the fact that a handful of Planned Parenthood affiliates (out of 700 health clinics) have never profited from fetal tissue donation and any reimbursement they received was simply to cover associated costs. (To read this bizarre testimony, go to House Judiciary Committee Hearings, at <http://judiciary.house.gov/index.cfm/hearings>)

Hearing a "Farce" - With all of this fear-mongering, ignorance of evidence and lack of legitimate representation by Republican members, Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N. Y.) was correct in calling the whole spectacle a "farce."

Aside from the Republicans' and the witnesses' idiotic comments, it must be emphasized that fetal tissue research is one of the most promising areas of medical research. As an editorial in the New York Times (9/15/15) notes, "Fetal tissue cells were used to develop the original polio vaccine and are still used to make vaccines for rubella, shingles, chickenpox and an experimental Ebola vaccine."

The editors also report that fetal tissue research is used to "develop treatment for H.I.V., end-stage breast cancer, diabetes and Parkinson's, among other conditions." Ironically, "fetal tissue is critically important in research for studying conditions that affect the health of fetuses and newborn infants, brain injuries in the womb that lead to cerebral palsy, and eye conditions that lead to macular degeneration," the article points out.

Life-Saving Research Threatened - Unfortunately, there are a number of bills introduced in Congress that would limit or halt research using fetal tissue and at least 12 states have begun inquiries into fetal tissue research or are considering legislation that would halt research with fetal tissue. The fallout from this misdirected effort could weigh heavily on university centers and hospitals conducting potentially life-saving research projects that would lose important government funding.

This is all very reminiscent of the “dark ages” under George W. Bush when a ban on federal funding for stem cell research was enacted, causing considerable delay in important medical research initiatives and driving researchers abroad. Attacks on U.S. labs engaging in medical research with fetal tissue are ongoing and many researchers are fearful of speaking out about their work. (Read more at <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2015/09/04/anti-choice-lawmakers-use-planned-parenthood-attack-videos-target-fetal-tissue-research/>)

Though Planned Parenthood opponents’ rhetoric is about abortion and “baby parts,” this campaign is really an all-out effort to kill a popular national network of women’s health centers providing a range of services for millions of low- and moderate-income women and men each year. Of the Planned Parenthood clinics that provide abortion care none utilize federal dollars for that service, as the law requires. (NOW and allies believe that the ban on federal funding for abortion care is an injustice to poor women and continue to call for repeal.)

Planned Parenthood Clinics Critical for Women - If Planned Parenthood were to cease operations, its opponents’ allege that community health centers can fill the void in providing affordable reproductive health care services. But a report requested by the Congressional Budget Office from the Guttmacher Institute report details the critical role of Planned Parenthood clinics in serving more contraceptive clients than hospital health centers, health departments, and other types of health centers. The report noted that, “Although Planned Parenthood health centers comprise 10% of all publicly funded family planning centers they serve 36% of all clients who obtain care from the clinic network.” (See, <http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2015/09/08/quantifying-planned-parenthoods-critical-role-in-meeting-the-need-for-publicly-supported-contraceptive-care/>)

Close observers of the repeated attacks on family planning believe that Catholic bishops, allied with right wing, fundamentalist anti-abortion rights activists, are the chief instigators of these relentless campaigns. The bishops are still smarting over women’s groups’ victory in adding a mandate for no cost-sharing contraceptive coverage in insurance plans purchased through the Affordable Care Act health exchanges. The more than 100 lawsuits Catholic leaders and right-wing political activists organized to undermine contraceptive coverage have met with mixed success, with the exception of the deplorable Hobby Lobby Supreme Court decision which

allows so-called “closely held” companies with religious objections to be exempted and the accommodations that have been granted by the Obama administration.

Will There Be A Shutdown? - The next few weeks will reveal how truly nutty many Republican members have become. To continue funding government operations past the Sept. 30 end of the fiscal year, action must be taken by Congress passing various appropriation measures or adopting a Continuing Resolution just to keep government funds flowing at current levels. In either scenario, a family planning defunding provision is likely to be attached. Otherwise, the country may face a second government shutdown and all of the costly consequences that entails.

Ultimately, the voters who send these clowns to Congress must take an honest look at whether these elected officials are appropriately representing the public interest, conducting legislative business with integrity and whether they should be returned to office in 2016. The answer should be obvious.