

INNOVATING THROUGH CRISIS

*How Pregnancy Centers Provided Compassion,
Hope, and Help During a Global Pandemic*



COMPASSION, HOPE, AND HELP DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

IN EARLY 2020, THE COVID-19 VIRUS UPENDED THE WORLD, impacting all areas of life, from how people grocery shop to how they travel and work. As states across the US responded in different ways - some restricted travel and gathering size, while others ordered businesses to close and people to stay in their homes - pregnancy centers rushed to adapt their services to meet increasingly desperate needs.

During the first three months of the pandemic, Care Net's Center Services team was inundated with questions from its network of more than 1,100 pregnancy centers, all asking the same thing - "How do we continue meeting the needs of our community during this pandemic?" After operating with COVID-19 for more than a year, it's abundantly clear that centers innovated, adapted, and pressed on in answering that question, though at times the answer changed on a daily basis!

Throughout this ebook, you'll be inspired and encouraged by the many ways Care Net pregnancy centers overcame the challenges presented by COVID-19 in 2020; not just surviving the pandemic, but thriving through updating practices, providing their services in new ways, and most importantly, sharing life-affirming, Christ-centered compassion, hope, and help with women and men facing pregnancy decisions.

AN INCREASED NEED

Stay-at-home orders and social distancing enforced across the country made it impossible for centers to offer their services as usual. Yet the economic uncertainty created by COVID made pregnancy center services all the more vital. Calls to pregnancy centers skyrocketed “as vulnerably, newly pregnant women have encountered job loss, lack of health insurance, increased domestic violence and indefinite financial instability.”¹

Financial insecurity is the most frequently cited reason for obtaining an abortion,² yet COVID created a unique situation where, in spring 2020, abortion clinic traffic was down 32 percent³ while the unemployment rate rose to 14.8% - “a level not seen since data collection started in 1948.”⁴ This perfect storm created an environment where more people than ever were at risk for abortion and thus more people than ever needed the services provided by pregnancy centers.

In 2020, Care Net centers ended up serving 270,263 new clients. While centers experienced a 21% percent decline in the average number of new clients per center compared to 2019, a higher percentage of those new clients were pregnant and at-risk for abortion. Threesa Sadler, Center Director of the Raffa Clinic reported, “we began seeing a higher rate of abortion minded women and our medical staff was diligent to make sure we met their needs. The increased unemployment rate also meant a large increase in referrals from other social service agencies for material assistance.”

Care Net’s Pregnancy Decision Line also saw a 10 percent increase in calls during the first nine months of the pandemic. These callers received life-affirming coaching specific to their needs and many requested and received pregnancy center connections.

1 Andersen, E. (2020, August 10). ‘Greater level of desperation’: As COVID-19 Rages, pregnancy centers see surge in demand. USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/08/09/covid-19-creates-desperation-women-turn-pregnancy-centers-column/3316935001/>

2 Biggs, M. A., Gould, H., & Foster, D. G. (2013). Understanding why women seek abortions in the US. BMC Women’s Health, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6874-13-29>

3 Andersen, M., Bryan, S., & Slusky, D. (2020). (rep.). COVID-19 Surgical Abortion Restriction Did Not Reduce Visits to Abortion Clinics. Retrieved from <http://ftp.iza.org/dp13832.pdf>

4 Falk, G., Romero, P., Carter, J., Nicchitta, I., & Nyhof, E. (2021). (rep.). Unemployment Rates During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R46554.pdf>

ADAPTING SERVICES AND CLIENT CARE

While services vary center to center, most pregnancy centers offer clients a combination of pregnancy test and ultrasound services, peer coaching, education, and material resources. Historically, these services are nearly universally provided in person.

Adapting services to comply with stay-at-home and social distancing orders was challenging, especially in the first several months of the pandemic. State and local regulations were changing on a weekly and sometimes daily basis, yet centers rose to the challenge.

In a matter of weeks, centers shifted their service models to continue meeting needs. Many centers in areas with stay-at-home orders began offering phone coaching and virtual consultations in lieu of in-person appointments while other centers that were able to remain open as essential service providers overhauled their processes to keep clients safe.

Many implemented contactless check-in, reorganized their centers to maintain social distancing, and adhered to strict cleaning and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) use.

Along with an increased client need, a portion of Care Net's pregnancy center affiliates have reported seeing an increase in vulnerable clients at-risk for experiencing abortion. Threesa Sadler, Center Director of the Texas-based Raffa Clinic, explained, "We only have three OB/GYN providers in our county and they began limiting appointments. This meant our demand started to grow. We were able to adapt to meet the need and be a resource to our community in a larger way."

VIRTUAL SERVICES

Many pregnancy centers turned to phone coaching - extended conversations with potential clients over the phone. Lakes Area Pregnancy Support Center in Brainerd, MN for example began offering phone coaching and reported more than 330 phone consultations, many of which included sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with interested callers. In total, centers reported over 16,000 pre-client phone coaching sessions during COVID.

Many centers also began offering virtual consultations offering clients existing online meetings with peer coaches. Virtual consultations allowed centers to continue serving clients during the most severe parts of the pandemic - clients who otherwise may not have connected with a pregnancy center. 10 percent of all client sessions occurred virtually in 2020, and 17 percent of all new clients completed their intake form virtually.⁵

“WE SAW MORE ABORTION MINDED WOMEN BOTH VIRTUALLY AND LIVE THAN EVER BEFORE!”

- MARY MICHAELS, FIRST CARE WOMEN’S CLINIC CEO

Even centers that remained open as essential service providers incorporated virtual consultations as an option for clients who felt safer meeting virtually. “We saw more abortion minded women both virtually and live than ever before!” First Care Women’s Clinic CEO Mary Michaels said, reflecting on the last year.

While virtual consultations were not always as engaging as in-person meetings,⁶ multiple centers reported that incorporating virtual consultations was beneficial. Many plan to continue offering them alongside their regular appointments, even after COVID is over.

Paola Sanchez, Executive Director at Resources for Women, shared how a virtual consultation helped her connect more deeply with a client.⁷ Paola was meeting virtually with a particularly disengaged client when, a few minutes into their

⁵ Some centers used virtual intakes for in-person appointments.

⁶ In a March, 2021 survey of 135 Care Net affiliated centers, 53 percent reported clients seemed to be more receptive during in-person meetings, while the rest said clients seemed to have no preference, or were more receptive during virtual consultations.

⁷ Paola’s story can be heard in this Care Net webinar: <https://affiliates.care-net.org/Education/Center-Insights-Library/Post/5321>

conversation, the father of the baby entered the room (the client was at home) and the two started fighting. Paola wasn't sure what to do, but decided to stay on the call since the client hadn't hung up. After a few minutes, the client came back to the call and her demeanor had completely changed-- she was open and honest as she spoke to Paola. The client was abortion-vulnerable, but after her coaching session with Paola, she scheduled an ultrasound at the center. That ultrasound and the coaching she received changed everything. Ultimately the client chose life for her twins!

Educational services, like parenting and sexual risk avoidance classes for teens, offered more challenges during COVID. Once again though, centers across the country overcame the difficulties and continued to meet needs in truly incredible ways.

When Women's Pregnancy Center in Florida had to pause the regular classes they held in churches and schools, they started a podcast that "equips and encourages parents, couples and students to have ongoing conversations about God's design for love sex and relationships." So far, the podcast has been downloaded more than 5,000 times.

Colorado Springs Pregnancy Center typically has a robust in-school sexual risk avoidance program, so when COVID kept schools closed during the fall 2020 semester, the center provided an astounding 350 webinars for 20 different high schools.

A Caring Pregnancy Center of Pueblo received an unexpected surprise when a local on-line high school academy asked to include the center's parenting class and Success and Development workshops as elective credits for their students. "The academy appreciated the additional mentor and peer support and incentives in addition to the earning of their academic credit," Center Director LeighAnn Hathaway said, and it also increased community awareness of the center.

Even with the unprecedented adoption of virtual services, the core pregnancy center services - pregnancy testing and ultrasounds - had to be offered in modified in-person settings throughout 2020. While 47 percent of centers had to stop seeing clients for at least some time due to the pandemic, nearly every center saw in-person clients at some point during COVID in accordance with state regulations.

"We continued to have very positive responses from our clients," Marshall Pregnancy Resource Center's Director Michele Spencer said. "Some thanked us for being so clean and careful. None were daunted by masks or electronic paperwork. They could feel our warmth through our masks even though they could not see our smiles. One mom texted that she was so lost when she first came in and we helped her so much!"

CURBSIDE SERVICES

While craft stores, restaurants, veterinary offices, and other businesses were getting creative with curbside services, so were pregnancy centers! Routine material resource distribution was the most obvious application for curbside pickup and many centers adopted that early on. In total, centers distributed nearly 1.6 million items to clients in 2020, despite the pandemic.

Tanya Carter, Director of The LightHouse Women's Center in Alabama, experienced a "role shifting" where former clients were donating excess diapers, wipes, and formula for the center to distribute. The center advertised their material resources drive-through on social media and their post went viral, being shared over 1,000 times. "We were also able to pray with moms and dads [as] they picked up items they needed and allow the light and love of Christ to shine bright in, quite possibly, the darkest time many of us alive have ever walked through. It was beautiful to witness a little piece of heaven come to earth in our little parking lot here in rural West Alabama," Tanya recalls.

Stowe Pregnancy Resource Center in Ohio went a step further, delivering vital material resources directly to clients' homes who could not travel to the center. Colorado's Hope Pregnancy Center meanwhile helped in a community-wide effort to distribute diapers, wipes, and formula provided by FEMA.

Some centers branched out beyond material resources, exploring what else they could do while allowing clients to remain in the safety of their own cars. Hill Country Pregnancy Care Center, in Texas, for example created a take-home STD test kit that clients could pick up and return for evaluation and potential treatment. This freed the center to prioritize pregnancy test patients for the limited in-person appointments available.



Lighthouse Women's Center was able to reach thousands of community members through it's social media presence.

"IT WAS BEAUTIFUL TO WITNESS A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN COME TO EARTH IN OUR LITTLE PARKING LOT HERE IN RURAL WEST ALABAMA."

- TANYA CARTER, DIRECTOR OF LIGHTHOUSE WOMEN'S CENTER



Local news coverage helped Bakersfield Pregnancy Center serve more families in need.

California-based Bakersfield Pregnancy Center and Texas-based Marshall Pregnancy Resource Center hosted successful curbside baby showers and a Christmas party! Michele Spencer, Center Director at Marshall Pregnancy Resource Center, said, “Our annual Christmas party for moms and their babies born in the current year had to be curbside, but it was by far the largest participation yet. We praised many sweet babies through car windows and gave large gift bags and cheerful encouragement!”

Bakersfield Pregnancy Center’s community baby shower was featured on local news and viewers were encouraged to donate resources so the center could continue supporting local families. “We were just simply passing out diapers, baby wipes, and

formula to moms in need, whether they were a client of ours or not!” said Director Erin Rogers.



Richland Pregnancy Center distributed supplies to expectant mothers.

Richland Pregnancy Center also participated in a community drive-thru baby shower that provided families with material supplies.⁸ The center was able to distribute 130 bags of supplies to expectant mothers.

8 Thomas, T. (2020, October 19). Agencies support pregnant women through Oct. 23 Drive-thru Community baby shower. Richland Source. https://www.richlandsource.com/thrive/agencies-support-pregnant-women-through-oct-23-drive-thru-community-baby-shower/article_7e27b618-1223-11eb-89f2-03eb2e9221c5.html.

CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Establishing relationships with community organizations is critical for pregnancy centers to offer referrals for services they don't directly provide, and Care Net affiliates found many creative ways to continue building such connections throughout COVID-19. The pandemic even gave some centers opportunities to serve clients referred to them by state health and human services departments, Family Services agencies, churches, schools, and local doctors. Several centers even received referrals from Planned Parenthood!

Richland Pregnancy Services in Ohio was instrumental in helping women with critical complications. "We were able to see patients that had life-threatening miscarriages (ectopic & miscarrying twins as a high-risk pregnancy due to diabetes and previous miscarriage)," Richland Pregnancy Services' Executive Director said, "The local OB office [which was closed due to COVID] told both of these ladies to just monitor their bleeding, but praise the Lord we were open and could minister to them right away and ensure they got into the ER."

"WE WERE ABLE TO SEE PATIENTS THAT HAD LIFE-THREATENING MISCARRIAGES....AND ENSURE THEY GOT INTO THE ER."

- AMANDA CLARK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF RICHLAND PREGNANCY SERVICES

Mid Cities Women's Clinic in Texas served 11 clients who were referred by Planned Parenthood. "We were able to share the gospel with each of these patients and many trusted Christ. We also saw a large percentage choose life!" the Executive Director shared.

When several OBGYN offices near Care Net Pregnancy Resource Center in Connecticut stopped seeing pregnant women before 12 weeks, the offices sent patient to the center instead. "It was great to start building better relationships with the doctors in our area," Executive Director Lisa Maloney said.

Lakes Area Pregnancy Support Center strengthened its relationship with a counseling organization that specializes in pregnancy and post-partum issues. While both organizations had previously referred clients to one another, the counseling organization provided specialized training for the center's staff and volunteers during COVID.

The increasingly desperate needs of clients during COVID inspired First Care Women's Clinic in Florida to focus on growing their referral network. Their Client Services Director, Mary Michaels, noted the center now has established relationships with an adoption attorney who specializes in undocumented mothers; two new OBGYN offices that provide additional services like a food pantry; a school that provides customized paths to High School graduation, including services for pregnant students; a pediatrician who will see clients' newborns and minor clients; and more. This referral network "provides our clients with valuable next steps while allowing us to remain focused on our mission," Mary explained.

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Overhauling service models would be daunting at any time, but COVID forced Care Net centers to accomplish all of this while dealing with yet another complicating factor - volunteer loss. Thirty-seven percent of center leaders cited personnel loss as their biggest challenge during the pandemic,⁹ describing things like, “trying to function without volunteers,” “loss of elderly volunteers due to COVID concerns,” and a “shortage of volunteers while client load increased.”

Pregnancy centers are lean organizations which rely heavily on volunteers to accomplish their missions. In 2019, for example, Care Net centers had a total of 22,082 volunteers, or about 21 volunteers per center. By contrast, Care Net centers averaged only 16 volunteers in 2020 and many of those did not work through the entirety of the pandemic¹⁰ due to health concerns.

Instead, most centers relied on their few paid staff members to carry the extra load (in 2020, Care Net affiliates had on average 6 paid staff members per center). COVID exposure among the remaining staff made things even harder, requiring “constant and sudden flexibility,” as Kim Ford, the Client Services Director at HeartReach, put it.

Despite this overwhelming challenge, many of the center leaders who listed staffing as one of the biggest struggles also said they were most proud of the faithfulness of their teams. “This staff is incredible and so unified in mission,” said Michelle Gregory, Director of Mid Cities Women’s Clinic, “When everyone else was staying at home, this staff put themselves in harm’s way to continue to minister to those who needed help and hope!”

Cheryl Cresswell at Pennsylvania’s Jewel Women’s Center praised her team for, “holding down the fort and holding on to the commitment we had made to reach the families who need our services most! They went above and beyond!”

⁹ Based on March 2021 survey responses from 135 Care Net affiliates.

¹⁰ Data on volunteer numbers includes January and February 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic becoming widespread in the United States and thus does not fully demonstrate how few volunteers worked through the pandemic months.

Rebecca Klein, Executive Director of A Woman's Choice in Lakeland, FL summarized many centers' perspectives when she said, "I was most proud of the commitment, dedication and perseverance of my team. Not only were we facing a global pandemic, but each one individually was facing personal trials and struggles....As much as we were physically apart in new ways, we came together and were stronger as a team, lifting, encouraging, and praying for one another constantly. It was such a blessing."

The leaner teams created by the COVID pandemic were forced to prioritize aggressively, deciding on the most important ways to spend limited time. In responding to these difficult decisions, center personnel demonstrated a consistent value for one another and the clients they served in their community.

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- REBECCA KLEIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF A WOMAN'S CHOICE

"Our team came together, most working out of their scope or job description, and working long hours to accommodate our clients," Executive Director Niki Mattson said, describing her co-laborers at Mosaic in Lansdowne, VA. "In all my years, I've never seen such love and dedication from a team."

This appreciation for staff led many center leaders to implement measures to care for those taking on additional responsibilities. Slightly more than half of centers adopted more flexible work from home options or implemented new remote work opportunities where feasible to help balance workload. Pregnancy Care Center of Lake City in Florida quickly adopted COVID-specific policies to ensure employees, "would be taken care of if they had to get a COVID test, or tested positive."

AN INNOVATIVE FUTURE

Through the pandemic, Care Net pregnancy centers maintained their commitment to caring for clients holistically. Not only were center team members stretched by the physical and mental health concerns engendered by the pandemic, they recognized the spiritual and emotional toll their clients were experiencing as well. In response, they offered the most important gift they could: spiritual support. Center workers shared the gospel at least 96,116 times and 7,733 clients gave their lives to Christ.

Reflecting on 2020, Jane Wahl, Executive Director of Pregnancy Resource Center Medical Clinic, said, "We are a small center, but God did mighty things! Forty-six moms who had an abortion plan or contemplated abortion chose life for their babies and 83 people (women and men) came to saving faith in Jesus Christ! That's the most babies saved and salvations in one year for us! Praise God!"

Emily Potter, Center Director at Options Pregnancy Center in Alpena, Michigan summed up many centers' perspective about the pandemic: "COVID lockdown allowed us to adjust how we approached client care and forced us to think outside the box, with great results."

Although adopting new practices and service models was challenging, more than 90 percent of centers will be continuing some of these new practices after COVID.

Instead of crumbling under the immense pressure, Care Net's affiliated pregnancy centers are emerging from the pandemic stronger than ever, with a greater understanding of God's provision and countless first-hand accounts of His faithfulness. Clients and their children found eternal hope because of the unwavering faithfulness of Care Net pregnancy center leaders and personnel who allowed Christ to work through them during one of the most daunting years. And centers innovated and adapted their service models in ways that will better serve clients and all stakeholders into the future. While we could only share a few stories here, the data shows that the entire Care Net family of centers served their communities with excellence throughout the pandemic.



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