

Abortion foes brace for battle as Planned Parenthood hearings begin

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(The Christian Science Monitor) Congressional hearings on Planned Parenthood began today, the first hearings since anti-abortion group Center for Medical Progress released clandestine videos in July that the center says show Planned Parenthood engaging in illegal sales of fetal tissue.

Planned Parenthood operates clinics around the country that offer contraception, tests for sexually transmitted diseases, and abortions. Law prohibits fetal tissue from being sold for profit, but some are accusing Planned Parenthood of violating this law by providing fetal tissue to medical researchers. Planned Parenthood maintains that facilities only collect fees to offset the cost of harvesting and delivering the tissue to researchers, as permitted by law.

In testimony prepared for today's House Judiciary Committee hearing, James Bopp Jr., general counsel for National Right to Life, said the videos show Planned Parenthood "violates various federal laws," and only banning research using fetal tissue from abortions or abortion itself "will prevent the inevitable abuse."

Bopp said comments by Planned Parenthood officials in the videos show they are "trying to make money off of human fetal tissue," and urges lawmakers to investigate what he believes is a violation against partial-birth abortion.

"There is simply no evidence in these misleadingly edited videos of a violation" of statutes countered Priscilla Smith, who directs Yale Law School's Program for the Study of Reproductive Justice.

While neither Planned Parenthood nor the Center for Medical Progress are testifying at today's hearing, Planned Parenthood has denied the allegations.

The hearings on the use of fetal tissue instigated a larger debate on abortion, an often controversial issue that appears set to become point of contention during upcoming federal budget negotiations.

Senator Ted Cruz (R., Texas), along with other conservative lawmakers, is threatening to block a spending bill to keep government agencies open post October 1 if Planned Parenthood is not barred from receiving the \$500 million in government funds it gets every year.

Cruz, who is running for the Republican nomination, is backed by the influential conservative advocacy group ForAmerica that is also engaged in inciting the issue, asking all Republican party hopefuls to “make a firm commitment to starve Planned Parenthood of federal funding,” and to launch an investigation by the Department of Justice into Planned Parenthood.

In a letter to Republican front-runner Donald Trump, ForAmerica Chairman Brent Bozell wrote, “We need a firm commitment from you so that voters may identify you as a pro-life man of your word, and expose fellow candidates who are giving lip service to this issue but intend to put this on the backburner if elected.”

However, Republican leaders in Congress don’t want to alienate women from their support base and are wary of a standoff that precipitates a federal shutdown. GOP leaders hope “showdown votes over Planned Parenthood can be isolated to separate bills not tied to financing the government,” writes the Associated Press.

This comes after several states have already made plans to cut state funding for Planned Parenthood.