

Hearing launches push to defund Planned Parenthood□

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—House Republicans began their effort to defund Planned Parenthood Sept. 9 with the first in a series of hearings intended to show the group illegally harvests and sells tissue from aborted fetuses, a claim the group vehemently denies.

The hearing in the House Judiciary Committee—titled “Examining the Horrific Abortion Practices at the Nation’s Largest Abortion Provider”—is the first of several hearings expected this fall as three House committees pursue investigations of Planned Parenthood. House Republicans also launched a website to track the investigations.

Broad scope

Planned Parenthood Vice President Dawn Laguens insisted the House hearing offered anti-abortionists a platform to address issues beyond the scope of its stated purpose.

“From the provocative title to the slate of lifelong anti-abortion activists invited to testify, it’s clear this hearing was not about Planned Parenthood. It was a chance for anti-abortion extremists and members of Congress to promote their political agenda of banning abortion in this country,” she said.

Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., opened the hearing with a call for Congress to pass legislation to bar all abortions after five months of gestation, which would “help ensure that the body parts of late-aborted babies cannot be sold because late-term abortions would be generally prohibited.”

Examples of failed abortions

Republican committee members raised examples of abortions gone wrong or stories of infants who were mistreated or killed after failed abortions.

Perhaps the central dispute of the hearing emerged when Goodlatte asked Priscilla Smith—the one witness who supported Planned Parenthood—whether she believed a standard “dilation and evacuation” abortion is “humane.” She responded that for fetuses not viable to live outside the womb, it is a humane way to end the pregnancy. “Your view of humanity and mine are different,” Goodlatte replied.

Undercover videos

The hearings follow the July release of undercover videos showing Planned Parenthood officials discussing the fees charged to research groups for various types of tissue from late-term abortions and the techniques involved in recovering it. The group that produced the videos, the Center for Medical Progress, says they prove Planned Parenthood illegally sells fetal tissue for profit.

Planned Parenthood claims the videos are heavily edited and falsely portray the group’s tissue-donation program.

“While all of these congressional investigations are based on false claims and videos that have been completely discredited, we continue to be fully transparent and cooperate with all of the committees,” spokesman Eric Ferrero said.

The Judiciary Committee announced the hearing was intended to “hear from the experts on the issues surrounding the alleged acts of Planned Parenthood.” Goodlatte and Constitution and Civil Justice Subcommittee Chairman Trent Franks, R-Ariz., said in announcing the hearing, “Planned Parenthood and its executives must answer for the alleged atrocities

brought to light in the videos by the Center for Medical Progress.” But neither group was invited to testify.

Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I., also got Franks to concede that the committee’s GOP majority has not seen the full unedited videos and had not asked the Center for Medical Progress to provide them.

Instead, the hearing featured James Bopp, the general counsel for National Right to Life, two anti-abortion activists who survived botched abortions and Smith, a Yale Law School fellow who is a longtime advocate for abortion rights.

Abortion survivors testify

The abortion survivors did not address the tissue recovery practices described in the videos, instead making the case against abortion in general.

“We will have to give an account as a nation, before God, for our apathy and for the murder of over 50 million children in the womb,” Gianna Jessen said in a written statement.

Melissa Ohden, founder of the Abortion Survivors network, acknowledged her failed abortion did not take place at Planned Parenthood, but said in prepared testimony she was there to “give voice” to “the hundreds of thousands of children who will have their lives ended by Planned Parenthood this year alone.”

Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., the top Democrat on the committee, said the panel was wasting its time on a “one-sided” hearing providing “no credible evidence that Planned Parenthood violated the law.”

The House Energy and Commerce Committee also is investigating the videos and has requested information from Planned Parenthood and several

scientific research companies about the practices involved in their recovery of fetal tissue for research.

The Oversight and Government Reform Committee in August asked the Department of Health and Human Services for details on federal funding Planned Parenthood receives and whether health services the group provides can be obtained elsewhere.

Remove all federal funds

Conservatives are mounting an effort to have all federal funding stripped from Planned Parenthood—the group gets about \$500 million a year—and have threatened to block any spending bill that includes money for the group, even if that means forcing the federal government to shut down when the fiscal year expires Sept. 30.

Conyers noted federal dollars cannot be used for abortions in most cases.

“The horrible irony here is that defunding Planned Parenthood would increase the number of unintended pregnancies and drastically, I fear, increase the number of abortions,” Smith said.

Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., said there was no evidence that would be the result.