



# Republicans across US take aim at Planned Parenthood

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The growing furor over undercover videos that purported to show employees of Planned Parenthood clinics in the United States trading in fetal tissue from abortions is threatening a shutdown of the federal government. The government may be unable to pay some workers this fall if conservative Republican legislators in Washington, DC, carry out their threat to reject any federal spending bill that continues funding the organization.

Meanwhile, legislators and governors in Republican dominated states have launched a slew of investigations and bills targeting the women's health organization.

President Barack Obama has promised to veto any spending bill that removes Planned Parenthood's \$500m (£325m; €445m) in federal funding. The Republican leadership in Congress has declared its intention to defund the organization but is seeking to avoid a politically damaging showdown over the upcoming budget.

"The goal here is not to shut down the government. The goal is to stop these horrific practices of organizations selling baby parts," said House speaker John Boehner. But the speaker faces a potential revolt within his own party, as 40 conservative Republicans signed a letter refusing to pass any spending bill that funds Planned Parenthood.

Eight heavily edited videos have now been released by an anti-abortion group whose members posed as executives from a fake company seeking fetal tissue for supply to research institutions. The videos show Planned Parenthood employees and affiliates discussing the harvesting and transfer of organs from aborted fetuses for use in research. Planned Parenthood has argued that it makes no profit from these transactions but merely recoups costs legally.

The videos have motivated presidential candidates in this week's debate to vie to outdo each other in their condemnation of Planned Parenthood. Senator Ted Cruz called it "an ongoing criminal enterprise," while Carly Fiorina said, "I would like to link these two issues, both of which are incredibly important: Iran and Planned Parenthood." Iran, she suggested, threatened security, while Planned Parenthood threatened "the character of our nation."

Louisiana's governor, Bobby Jindal, a presidential candidate who was excluded from the main debate because of poor poll numbers, terminated his state's Medicaid contracts with both of its Planned Parenthood clinics. The organization sought a federal court injunction to block the move.

Judge John W DeGravelles asked Louisiana to prove that the cancellations wouldn't adversely affect the clinics' 5200 patients. The judge criticized a list of 2000 other providers that

the state claimed would be able to serve the patients' needs. "We have dentists on there, sir," he snapped at Stephen Russo, a lawyer for the state. "You're telling me that they can provide family planning and related services? . . . And the ophthalmologists? . . . And the audiologists?" The state cut the list to 29 providers, but the judge said that some of those were still not valid.

The judge also complained that the state gave no reason for its actions. "You've got 5200 women whose care is interrupted," he said, "and you're telling me Secretary Kliebert's reason for doing that is there is no reason?"

"She has chosen to terminate that contract," Russo replied.

With defeat in court looming, the state rescinded the contract terminations, then refiled them "for cause," citing a \$4m settlement that Planned Parenthood had paid Texas over a 2013 billing dispute. This made it an unsuitable Medicaid partner, Louisiana now claims.

Wisconsin, governed by the Republican presidential candidate Scott Walker, cut state funding to Planned Parenthood four years ago, but Walker has supported a new bill put forward by Republican legislators making the use of fetal tissue in research a criminal offence. The bill, under which researchers could face six years in prison, is opposed by the state university and chamber of commerce.

In Ohio, governed by candidate John Kasich, a bill is advancing to cut the state's funding of Planned Parenthood. Several other states are poised to follow but are first completing legislative investigations. In Missouri, state legislators are probing the organization's relations with Missouri University School of Medicine, which had agreements to let students perform clinical hours at its clinics. The university has cancelled all its contracts with Planned Parenthood over the past month.

In Florida, Governor Rick Scott sent out investigators to inspect all 16 of the state's Planned Parenthood clinics. The Agency for Healthcare Administration investigators prepared a statement saying, "There is no evidence of the mishandling of fetal remains at any of the 16 clinics we investigated across the state." But internal emails obtained by the news website Politico show that Scott's communications staff removed this sentence from the agency's press release.

Ben Carson, the neurosurgeon candidate who has recently surged to second place in Republican polling behind Donald Trump, continued to condemn Planned Parenthood and fetal tissue research, even as it emerged that he had himself used aborted fetal tissue in a study he coauthored.<sup>1</sup> Carson defended himself against charges of hypocrisy, saying, "To not use the tissue that

is in a tissue bank, regardless of where it comes from, would be foolish. Why would anybody not do that?"

In a separate statement Carson wrote, "There is absolutely no contradiction between the research I worked on in 1992 and my pro-life views." Before the news about the study came out, he had told the news broadcaster CNN that fetal tissue was not necessary for research. "Virtually everything that can be attributed to progress by using fetal tissue can also use other types of tissue," he claimed.

Planned Parenthood did find one unlikely defender in the crowded Republican field: Donald Trump. Before cutting all

funding he would, he told CNN's New Day program, "look at the good aspects of it, because I'm sure they do some things properly and good—good for women—and I would look at that."

- 1 Tsuchida T, Hruban RH, Carson BS, Phillips PC. Colloid cysts of the third ventricle: immunohistochemical evidence for nonneuroepithelial differentiation. *Hum Pathol* 1992;23:1317.

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