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CONNECTICUT NEWS

Pro-Life License Plates Under Fire

■ DMV To Reconsider Sponsor's Eligibility

May 26, 2006

By JON LENDER, Courant Staff Writer

A swirling national First Amendment debate hit Connecticut Thursday as the Department of Motor Vehicles said it will stop issuing special "Choose Life" license plates for The Children First Foundation - a New York-based pro-adoption group opposed to abortion - while it investigates, along with the attorney general, whether the foundation qualifies for the plates.

DMV Commissioner Ralph J. Carpenter agreed to reconsider the small foundation's eligibility for the plates - a status it applied for, and was granted, in 2003 - based on a letter Wednesday from Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and a Democratic state legislator charging that the group has "negligible, if any, `operations' in Connecticut, much less a base of operations in this state."

The charge surprised the nonprofit group's founder and president, Elizabeth Rex of Yonkers, N.Y. She had heard nothing from Blumenthal about such questions - but she quickly produced a series of letters from Connecticut officials who have recognized her group's efforts in recent years. The letters came from Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, Govs. John G. Rowland and M. Jodi Rell, the state's child advocate - and Blumenthal himself.

"Please extend my deepest appreciation and admiration to your members for the outstanding work that they do in advocating that every abandoned child should have a home with adoptive parents who love that child unconditionally," Blumenthal wrote Rex March 4, 2003.

"I'll be happy to answer any questions and concerns that anyone has," Rex said Thursday night. She said the small group's Connecticut operations base, which the DMV program requires, is the home of Corinn Dahm of the Gales Ferry section of Ledyard. The group's overall headquarters for its "Tri-State" efforts in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey is Rex's Yonkers home, although the group is maintaining its

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mailing address at a post office box in Eastchester, N.Y., where she formerly lived.

"This is the third time we've cooperated with the DMV," Rex said. "We dealt with their legal department and gave them all our papers, and they approved our plates."

Rex, who holds a doctorate in education, is the mother of three, two of whom are adopted. She co-founded the foundation in 2001 with her husband, Charles, who is a concert violinist in the first violin section of the New York Philharmonic.

She said the group supports pregnancy centers that do not offer abortion as an alternative, and also supports "safe havens" efforts under laws, including Connecticut's, that provide mothers the chance to drop off unwanted babies at specified areas such as hospitals and fire stations without fear of prosecution.

All told, about 200 "Choose Life" plates now travel Connecticut highways - with two crayoned kids' smiling faces on a yellow circle background, with "choose life" in childlike red-crayon lettering - as part of a DMV program that enables groups from the Knights of Columbus to at least one labor union to promote themselves.

The license plate includes the group's web address: www.fund-adoption.org. People can apply through that website for the special plates, a process that involves annual pledges that Rex said have enabled the organization to distribute about \$2,000 a year to groups that promote adoptions and safe havens in Connecticut. She said the fact that her group's budget is low, and that it works out of its members' homes, does not justify claims by Blumenthal that its efforts are insignificant.

Part of what has drawn attention to such a small number of "Choose Life" plates here is that they are patterned after plates promoted in recent years by the Florida-based group, Choose Life Inc. Rex's foundation has no legal affiliation with Choose Life Inc., but the Florida group has given permission to use its logo on the Connecticut plates. The Florida group's activities have spawned a national effort by abortion opponents to use license plates to raise money for pro-adoption groups in at least a dozen states. Critics including the American Civil Liberties Union have charged in other states that the plates are tantamount to a state-sponsored political or religious statement against abortion.

Those conflicts have led to lawsuits, and observers say a Tennessee case over the "Choose Life" tags may end up at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Rex's foundation has been involved in two such legal conflicts - both in New York and New Jersey, where the "Choose Life" plates have been blocked so far. "Connecticut did the right thing," Rex said Thursday - but now that is in doubt, at least for the several weeks that Blumenthal said his joint inquiry with the DMV are expected to take.

The questions arose when constituents of Rep. Roberta Willis, D-Salisbury, noticed the Connecticut "Choose Life" plates and contacted her. Willis said she agrees with their concerns that "Choose Life" is part of a campaign against abortion rights, and released one of the letters she received.

"This shell game [The Children First Foundation] has been playing has gone on long enough," Jim Young of Cornwall Bridge wrote Willis recently. "I am requesting that the 'Choose Life' license plate be pulled from the program immediately, their image and information be removed from the CTDMV website and that the issued plates be recalled until the CFF actually opens an office in Connecticut."

Willis said that when she sent an e-mail to Rex recently asking for the group's Connecticut address, she received a reply thanking her for her interest and telling her the information is on file with the DMV.

She pursued the issue with DMV, passing on her constituents' concerns and touching off

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an exchange of e-mails. In one, a DMV official told Willis the department's staff "disagrees that the legend 'Choose Life' promotes a 'specific religious belief,'" but added that "the allegation by Mr. Young that the sponsoring organization does not currently have a base of operation in Connecticut does raise a legitimate concern in DMV's opinion."

Blumenthal said in an interview Thursday: "Not every organization has a right to specialized license plates. They can be issued only to members of a qualified organization. And it demeans and degrades the value and legitimacy of such license plates if they are issued to groups that fail to qualify."

He said his own views in favor of abortion rights had nothing to do with his stance concerning Rex's group, adding: "If information comes to our attention that any other groups or organizations have specialized license plates without qualifying for them, I would raise similar questions about them."

Rex said she believes she can answer any of the state's concerns, as she has repeatedly in the past, and she said she hopes the current controversy will raise awareness and support for her group's efforts.

"Adoption and safe havens are common ground for people to come together," she said. "Whether you are pro-life or pro-choice, we can all support adoption and safe havens ... and help women have positive choices, and resources to support those choices."

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