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A Debate Swirls Over a Group's 'Choose Life' Vanity Plates

By **JANE GORDON**

WHEN the Children First Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Yonkers that promotes adoption, decided on a message for the vanity license plates it wanted to sell in the region, it picked "Choose life."

It drew the attention the group wanted, and not all of it was good.

The group's efforts to obtain permission to sell its plates in New York was rejected by the Department of Motor Vehicles in 2002 and by the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission in 2003 because of the message.

But Connecticut approved the plate in 2003 and the plate ended up on about 200 cars. Then in May, after complaints from residents that reached the State Legislature, the Department of Motor Vehicles, which approves and issues such vanity plates, stopped offering the plate at the request of the state attorney general. The complaints from residents said that Children First was part of a campaign against [abortion](#) rights.

"They told me we had a 'Choose life' plate, and I have to say, Connecticut being Connecticut, I was taken aback," said State Representative Roberta B. Willis, a Democrat of Salisbury, Conn.

Besides the issue of an organization making a controversial statement on a state-issued license plate, Ms. Willis told the department that she believed the group did not have a base of operations in Connecticut, a requirement for a group to be awarded a vanity plate.

She called [Richard Blumenthal](#), the attorney general, who asked the department to stop selling the plates until he had finished an inquiry.

"We are looking into their presence in the state in terms of activities and fund-raising endeavors and a headquarters," he said.

The move infuriated Elizabeth Rex, the group's president, who lives in Yonkers. She founded Children First in 2001, and through solo concerts by her husband, Charles Rex, a violinist for the [New York Philharmonic](#), and the sale of the license plates, she has donated about \$37,000 to centers that provide adoption help and information, but not abortions or abortion information.

She said that her foundation used the logo of another group, Choose Life, but that it is not otherwise affiliated.

"This action against our organization is unprecedented," she said on Wednesday. "By Friday afternoon, when I finally got a call from the D.M.V., I had been charged, tried, convicted, sentenced and executed, and the plate was eliminated without notification from anyone except a reporter from The Hartford Courant in Connecticut. Talk about due process and civil liberties."

Another state representative, T. R. Rowe, a Republican of Trumbull, Conn., became part of the debate last week when he wrote letters to Mr. Blumenthal and the Department of Motor Vehicles complaining that the plate had been dropped.

"My primary complaint is that this organization has been investigated three times previously by the D.M.V., including its regulations review committee," Mr. Rowe said.

The issue also led to a discussion of the larger question of whether the state should be in the business of advocating for any cause that meets its broad requirements for vanity plates.

"It's a very real question, brought to our attention by citizens saying the state shouldn't be providing a billboard or a bumper sticker for this group and maybe for any other group," Mr. Blumenthal said. "And it isn't the views or activities of this group that are potentially challengeable, it's whether their presence or activities in the state meet the criteria. The more thorny and challenging issues are whether the state should undertake to disapprove or arguably censor certain messages if the public billboard is there, or whether the state should have any such license plates that in effect carry a message."

Right now, it has plenty. As of this month, 84,371 different vanity plates were riding Connecticut's roads. Those include plates from the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association, the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation and the Penn State Alumni Association. The Alliance Defense Fund of Colorado, which represents conservative causes, has filed lawsuits in New York and New Jersey for Children First. Jeff Shafer, the Alliance lawyer handling the Connecticut issue for Children First, said he was considering one of two options in Connecticut. One would be filing a lawsuit, and the other would be negotiating with the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The state requires that any group awarded the plates be a nonprofit organization, with its primary purpose to serve the community. It also requires that the group not promote any specific religious belief, and that it have its base of operations in the state.

Mrs. Rex said she had met all the requirements, including providing a base of operations in Gales Ferry, Conn. at the home of a member of the Children First's advisory board.

For each of the plates offered by Children First, the people who bought the plates through the

group gave it a donation of \$10 and paid the Department of Motor Vehicles \$65. The group also paid an initial fee of \$3,500.

"We are going to review not just this, but all special interest plates to see that they comply with the requirements," said William Seymour, a spokesman for the department. "There are standards that need to be met for a qualified organization."

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