

Inside Texas' 'manipulative' adoption marketing campaign that targets young women and teen girls

Experts worry that young Texans will make life-altering decisions based on an idealized image of adoption.

By [Julian Gill](#), Staff writer March 21, 2024

Texas is spending \$4 million to extend an aggressive adoption marketing campaign that experts describe as highly misleading. The campaign, dubbed Modern Adoption, launched in October 2022 and has already generated millions of impressions through advertisements on billboards, radio, streaming services and mobile apps, according to state records. Billboard photographed on Thursday, Feb. 29, 2024, in Houston. Karen Warren/Staff photographer
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Since [Texas banned virtually all abortions](#), Texans may have seen a rosy message about adoption pop up on their phone screens or dot the view on their daily commute. It might read something like this:

Adoption helps “empower” women and allows them to be “in control” of their future.



That message or sentiment appears on billboards and digital advertisements that direct people to ModernAdoptionPlans.org — the product of a targeted, state-funded marketing campaign aiming to increase adoptions among young women and girls with unplanned pregnancies, according to documents obtained through an open records request. In the documents, organizers explicitly laid out a target audience with "the highest incidence of unplanned pregnancies": low-income, single women that "skew African-American and Hispanic" between the ages of 12 and 34.

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Seven adoption experts, including academics, adoptees and a birth mother, told Hearst Newspapers the campaign's fundamental message paints a misleading picture and oversimplifies what is a complex, traumatic experience for mothers who relinquish their child. Many of the experts were concerned about the potential for young people to make a life-altering decision based on an idealized image.

"It's so manipulative," said Adam Pertman, president of the National Center on Adoption and Permanency and an adoptive parent. "It doesn't take into account what we know historically, what we know from research, what we know from personal experiences."

The advertisements reflect a common anti-abortion talking point that adoption can replace pregnancy terminations and come as Texas increases its investment in groups that actively promote childbirth and marriage. Several of the private adoption agencies promoted on the adoption campaign website are Christian organizations that received up to \$1.8 million in state funding in fiscal year 2023, according to [public financial reports](#).

The campaign, dubbed Modern Adoption, was pitched as a pilot project by the [Texas Pregnancy Care Network](#), an anti-abortion group and the largest contractor under a state program known as Thriving Texas Families, formerly Alternatives to Abortion. TPCN tested the campaign in 2017 and officially launched it in August 2022 with \$2

million from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. Last year, HHSC gave the group another \$4 million to continue the project through fiscal year 2025, on top of TPCN's roughly \$35 million annual budget, according to contract documents obtained by Hearst Newspapers.

TPCN leaders did not respond to emails, phone messages and a letter dropped off at its Austin office. HHSC declined to comment on criticism of the campaign, but a spokesperson said groups funded through the Thriving Texas Families program "are required to provide evidence-based information regarding adoption services, programs, and related options." The groups also provide counseling and mentoring, educational information and classes on adoption, the spokesperson said.

A campaign with a broad reach

TPCN does not provide services itself but administers state money to maternity homes and adoption agencies, as well as crisis pregnancy centers, which the American Medical Association [describes broadly as sources of misinformation](#) that undermine women's health. The network says it has helped thousands of clients with basic needs such as maternity clothing and baby outfits, food and shelter, as well parenting classes and job assistance.

The Modern Adoption campaign reflects a significant expansion of the network's reach.

The campaign funnels people to a [glossy website](#) that includes a brief explanation of different types of adoption, an FAQ section, and a resources page with a map of crisis pregnancy centers and a list of private adoption agencies. The website, which offers a Spanish translation, also includes a "real stories" section with videos produced by [BraveLove](#), an adoption-promoting nonprofit. In the videos, birth mothers describe the emotions and challenges around the adoption but ultimately present their decision as positive and "beautiful."

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According to TPCN's project proposal, the campaign's mission is to “help people of all ages and walks of life understand how adoption in Texas has changed and to support and empower birth mothers to make choices that create more happy lives, including their own.”

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In the proposal, dated weeks after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, the network pointed to estimates that indicate a long line of people waiting to adopt a comparatively small number of infants: “For each baby eligible for adoption in the United States, there are approximately 36 families waiting to adopt.” The network said it intended to present adoption as an “equally viable” alternative to abortion. Acknowledging the state’s abortion laws, however, the network also saw an opportunity: “Adoption is going to be needed more than ever,” the group said in the proposal. The document also touted the support of Gov. Greg Abbott, an adoptive father.

The “judgment and stigma” around adoption in the Black community and the purportedly high rates of abortion among Hispanics was also a point of emphasis in the proposal, which claimed that adoption could “help prevent the poverty cycle” and offer a better life.

The campaign centers on major Texas cities and employs ads on streaming services, billboards, broadcast radio stations, mobile applications, websites, and podcasts, according to project documents. At one point, Mario Lopez, the actor and TV host, served as an influencer for the Modern Adoption campaign, health officials said.

The billboards match images on the website and can be spotted along major highways, including along southbound Highway 59 near Bissonnet in southwest Houston. Asked to provide copies or examples of the digital and radio advertisements, Texas HHSC said it did not have them and referred the question to TPCN. The project proposal and other documents obtained by the Chronicle contain

digital advertisements from the test campaign, which the network said it planned to build on.

Each ad includes photos of smiling young women and messages like “take control of an unplanned pregnancy” or “modern adoption plans put birth mothers in control.” Similar messaging can be found in sponsored ads on Google. Other sources [have heard Modern Adoption promotions](#) on local radio stations in San Antonio.

To boost the campaign, TPCN enlisted Steel Advertising. This Austin-based marketing company helped secure a powerful corporate partner, iHeartMedia, which boasts the ["largest reach of any digital audio company."](#) Steel Advertising and iHeart did not respond to requests for comment.

The iHeart network offers access to popular television and radio streaming services, such as ESPN Radio and TuneIn, and allows TPCN to target advertisements more effectively in ZIP codes with “high levels of unplanned pregnancies,” according to the proposal.

But the ad targeting strategy probes deeper than ZIP codes. In its proposal, TPCN said that because “most targeting is restricted to age 18-34,” they would use another layer of ad targeting to reach young teenagers. Advertisements would specifically target people who frequent “locations that indicate a greater alignment with young & at-risk behavior,” such as high schools, shelters, churches and major bus stops, according to the proposal.

The targeting strategies appear to have paid off in the first campaign cycle, according to a project status report filed in October. Each advertising category generated millions of impressions, or views, in its 10-month rollout. Broadcast radio advertisements alone generated nearly 40 million impressions, the report says.

[An incomplete picture](#)

TPCN outlined some common “misperceptions” about adoption in its proposal: adoption is abandoning a child; adoption is the same as foster care; and moms who choose adoption never see their children again.

In their attempts to offer more clarity, experts say TPCN presents an incomplete picture. For instance, the Modern Adoption website states “women and girls can be in control of their own future and can help shape a bright future for their baby.” At multiple points, the website says adoption “gives birth mothers the power” to make decisions about their involvement in their child's life. It touts open adoption — the most common arrangement that allows for communication between the birth parents and adoptive parents — as a way for birth mothers to stay connected with their children.

Open adoptions do allow birth mothers to select adoptive parents and be involved in their child’s life. But “there are a lot of forces that shape what actually happens,” said Deborah Siegel, an adoption researcher and professor in the School of Social Work at Rhode Island College.

In Texas, adoption agreements are based on trust and are not legally enforceable. Adoptive parents can change their minds about the level of contact with the birth mother at any time. This fact is mentioned in vague terms on the Modern Adoption website, where it describes the open adoption process: “It is guided by a non-legal agreement between the birth mother and adoptive parents.”

A more detailed description is buried in the website’s FAQ section, only visible by clicking the 18th question listed on the page.

“It's misleading to imply or suggest that what the pregnant woman wants is what’s going to happen,” said Siegel, adding that fathers also have a say in the process.

As part of Siegel's research, she interviewed 22 adoptive families over more than two decades, starting in 1988, after they chose open adoptions. Most adoptive families supported open communication with the birth family, but a wide range of challenges emerged, according to her [analysis published in the journal Social Work.](#)

One adoptee cut off contact with the birth mother for a year after learning the mother gave birth to and parented children after the adoption. Some adoptive parents divorced or disagreed over the wisdom of contact with the birth mother. One set of adoptive parents said the birth mother sent her infant son a

letter declaring she regretted the adoption. The adoptive parents never shared the letter with their son as he grew up. They were unsure how to handle it.

“All kinds of stuff happens in life,” Siegel said.

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Many prospective adoptive parents “will say almost anything” to come to an agreement with the birth parents, only to later realize they can’t follow through, said Pertman of the National Center on Adoption and Permanency. Adoption agencies also have a financial incentive to secure adoptions, he said, noting that the cost typically ranges between \$25,000 to \$50,000 for the adoptive family.

One private adoption agency, Abrazo Adoption Associates in San Antonio, clarifies the uncertainty surrounding adoption agreements on its website. Abrazo’s director, Elizabeth Jurenovich, said adoption agencies “have a fiduciary responsibility” to tell pregnant women considering adoption that the power ultimately resides with the adoptive family.

“Open adoption is being used as a pitch,” she said of the Modern Adoption campaign. “But they’re not providing information for women to make informed decisions.”

Making a 'constrained choice'

The language that permeates the Modern Adoption website, describing mothers who relinquish their child as “brave” and “loving,” reflects how marketing tactics have changed around adoption over the last several decades, from a shame-based approach to one that makes women feel like they’re making the right choice, experts say.

But women primarily turn to adoption when they lack social support and feel they have no other choice, said Gretchen Sisson, a sociologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who studies adoption and abortion.

“It’s a constrained choice; it isn’t an empowered choice,” she said. “If you gave people the resources they need to parent their children, they’d be parenting their children.”

Adoption also doesn't offer a way out of poverty or unsafe environments, said Sisson, who interviewed more than 100 birth mothers for her book, "Relinquished: The Politics of Adoption and the Privilege of American Motherhood." She spoke to women who had returned to abusive relationships or homelessness after they relinquished their child. "The adoption industry is almost entirely concerned with the child," she said. "And by that, I just mean facilitating the adoption."

At one point, the Modern Adoption website states that birth mothers can "feel confident and avoid regrets." But even for those who decide adoption is the right decision, the process is “physically, emotionally, and mentally heartbreaking,” said Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard, a birth mother who has spent years pushing for adoption reform through private adoption agencies, law firms and advocacy work. In 2016, Ranyard relinquished her child in an open adoption in Indiana. She loves her child’s parents, she said, but “open adoption is the most complicated relationship I've ever been in in my life.”

“People aren't really being told about any kind of nuance about the situation, including adoptive parents,” she said. “So then, when conflict does arise, they don't know how to handle it.”

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Most of the adoption agencies listed [on the Modern Adoption website](#) either did not respond to a request for comment or said they could not comment by publication time. One Texas-based adoption agency, Gladney Center for Adoption, said it has “a long track record of doing right by adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth mothers, and that's why we continue to grow our support services to better meet the needs of our clients,” according to a statement from Gladney spokesperson Kasey Pipes.

Even though [state documents](#) say the organization received nearly \$2,000 from TPCN in fiscal year 2023, Pipes said “we are not associated with Texas Pregnancy Care Network and haven't been for some time.”

“In fact, we were not associated with TPCN when this marketing campaign was launched,” she said.

The Modern Adoption website [previously listed Gladney as a resource](#), but the agency was removed from the site after inquiries by Hearst Newspapers. Gov. Abbott and multiple Republican lawmakers who have supported the Thriving Texas Families program, including State Sens. Lois Kolkhorst and Bryan Hughes, did not respond to questions about the campaign.

Amy O’Donnell, a spokesperson for the anti-abortion group Texas Alliance for Life, said the campaign “does a wonderful job of providing both stories and facts to let Texans know what is involved in the adoption process.”

“Our state believes that (adoption) is a loving option when a woman feels like that’s the best solution,” she said. She added the campaign is a “piece of a larger puzzle” of women’s support services in Texas, citing Healthy Texas Women, which provides family planning services.

In a statement, State Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, who chairs the Texas Women’s Health Caucus, questioned the need for a campaign with “coercive messaging that suggests adoption is the only brave and empowering option, implying that a decision to keep and raise one’s child is not.”

“That fact is that the state has not done enough to ensure that the adoption process is safe for all parties involved — birth parents, adoptive families and, most importantly, adoptees,” she said.

Allie Morris contributed to this report.