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## 'Choose Life' Plates Are Back

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By JON LENDER, Courant Staff Writer

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A pro-adoption foundation won reinstatement Friday of its right to sponsor special "Choose Life" license plates on Connecticut cars, ending a six-week suspension that had prompted the group to threaten a federal lawsuit against the state.

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"I am very grateful that the 'Constitution State' has reinstated our organization's plate," said Elizabeth Rex, president of The Children First Foundation, a New York-based pro-adoption group opposed to abortion.

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On May 25, Department of Motor Vehicles Commissioner Ralph Carpenter suspended the group's ability to sponsor any more "Choose Life" plates beyond the 200 or so put on Connecticut cars since 2003. In that year, the group was approved for the DMV specialty plates program that many groups use for fundraising.

Carpenter took that action - along with issuing an order that the group's plates be taken off a DMV website at which people can apply for them - after state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and a state legislator asked him reconsider the DMV's approval of Rex's foundation.

Blumenthal and Rep. Roberta B. Willis, D-Salisbury, wrote May 24 to Carpenter that Rex's foundation appeared to have "negligible, if any, 'operations' in Connecticut, much less a base of operations in this state."

At the time, Rex responded that the small group had established its credentials repeatedly to the DMV since 2003. She said fees for the special "Choose Life" plates help raise thousands each year to give to groups in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey such as pregnancy centers that do not offer abortion as an alternative to women with unwanted pregnancies. Rex supports "Safe Haven" efforts - including a toll-free hot line - under which women can anonymously relinquish newborns at hospitals.

On Friday, a DMV spokesman said the department had verified the group's compliance

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and restored its plates on the website.

After weeks of talks, DMV legal services chief John Yacavone and Rex signed a "stipulation and settlement agreement" that requires Rex's group to do little more than what it already has been doing - that is, "continue to maintain" existing elements of the program.

For example, it needs "continue to maintain" a Connecticut base of operations, which already is listed with the DMV as the home of an advisory board member, Corinn Dahm of the Gales Ferry section of Ledyard. The group's overall headquarters is Rex's Yonkers home.

The one change in the new agreement is that Rex designated a Connecticut resident - Dahm - rather than herself as the contact person with DMV.

The DMV said Friday that it has written to all groups that sponsor specialty plates - 50 or so - asking them to verify the same information. DMV has "liberal standards for organizations to qualify, and we're not looking to infringe on anyone's First Amendment rights," spokesman William Seymour said.

Rex had said her group was considering a lawsuit based on First and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution if the DMV did not relent. The foundation has pending lawsuits in New York and New Jersey, which have not authorized "Choose Life" plates. "Choose Life" tags originated in Florida and have sparked litigation in various states in a national First Amendment controversy. Critics in Connecticut and elsewhere, including "pro-choice" supporters of abortion, have claimed that the "Choose Life" slogan used by the adoption groups is intended to oppose abortion.

Rex said adoption is one "common ground" for both sides of the abortion debate. Her group's lawyer, Raymond W. Belair, said Friday's resolution shows "no elected official is ever above the law."

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