Pink Politics:
How Komen’s Planned Parenthood Communications Response Unraveled the Pink Ribbon

Arthur W. Page Society
2013 Case Study Competition
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Introduction

What happens when two organizations dedicated to saving women’s lives are drastically divided on a polarizing political issue like abortion? On January 31, 2012, the Associated Press broke the story that Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the nation’s leading breast-cancer charity, was ending its partnership with Planned Parenthood and was withdrawing funding from the nonprofit organization that provides reproductive health care services and advocacy.1 What ensued was a whirlwind three days in which Komen for the Cure stayed silent despite an outcry from the public, denied that the decision was politically motivated, shifted its reasons for cutting funding, remained unresponsive to the viral response on social media, stonewalled traditional media outlets, and ultimately apologized and reversed its decision. Due to the lack of a communications strategy and misjudgment of the situation, the once revered Susan G. Komen for the Cure faced a communications crisis and was left with a tainted brand and ongoing fallout that continues today. To understand this situation, it is important to know the background of the two organizations and the political environment during which this issue occurred.

Susan G. Komen for the Cure

Susan G. Komen for the Cure, originally called the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, was founded thirty years ago in Dallas, Texas, by Nancy Goodman Brinker and began as a promise that Brinker made to her dying sister that she would do everything in her power to end breast cancer forever.2 Susan G. Komen fought breast cancer courageously and selflessly put her energy towards thinking of ways to make life better for other women battling breast cancer throughout her three-year battle before passing away in 1980 at the age of 36.2

Over the years, Susan G. Komen for the Cure has developed into the world’s largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists with the common goal of working together to save lives, empower people, ensure quality care for all, and energize science to find the cure for breast cancer.2 Since Komen’s inception in 1982, it has invested $1.9 billion towards breast cancer research, health services, advocacy and support.2 The organization has several staple fundraising events, such as the Race for the Cure and the 3-Day for the Cure. The organization also functions on contributions from individual donors, partners, sponsors and supporters and has grown into the largest source of nonprofit funds dedicated to fighting breast cancer in the world. Komen has 121 affiliates that are mainly located in the United States and each affiliate stages a Race for the Cure, one of the organization’s biggest revenue generators. In 2010, 147 races were attended by around 1.7 million people, raising around $120 million.3 Komen utilizes a franchise-like model for its affiliates, in which they operate as independently incorporated nonprofits but abide by the national group’s policies.4 Affiliates funnel 25 percent of their net income to the national Komen organization, which uses that money to finance scientific research grants. The affiliates can then spend up to 75 percent of their net income on local programs of their choosing, like breast cancer screenings.4

In 2010, Susan G. Komen for the Cure spent about $141 million on public health education, including awareness campaigns, as well as around $75 million to finance medical research aimed at finding a cure and $67 million to fund breast cancer screening and treatment.3 Komen has invested $685 million to date in breast cancer research, more than any other organization.2
In the past 20 years, thanks to research, the breast cancer death rate has fallen by over 30 percent in the United States and five-year survival rates for women with early stage cancers are up from 74 percent to 99 percent, with more than 2.5 million breast cancer survivors in the United States today.  

Susan G. Komen for the Cure has also helped to build a global community, millions strong, who work together to support each other and end breast cancer. In fact, the organization has grown in scope and scale and today operates in more than 50 countries.

Komen for the Cure has worked to make access to care for the poor and uninsured possible; fund clinics that educate, screen and treat people with breast cancer; and provide groceries, transportation, wigs, prosthetics and insurance co-pays to help women face breast cancer with dignity and hope.

However, every 74 seconds, a woman dies of breast cancer somewhere in the world and about half a million people will die of breast cancer this year. That includes 40,000 women and 450 men in the United States annually. Komen for the Cure is dedicated to changing those numbers, citing the difference the organization has already made in the first three decades, and is focused on finding a cure for breast cancer in the future and on "making those cures available to women everywhere."

Susan G. Komen for the Cure consistently receives a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, the nation’s largest independent evaluator of charities. In fact, Komen has received the prestigious 4-star rating for five years in a row, which only five percent of charities achieve. Charity Navigator utilizes a two dimensional rating system that factors in an organization’s financial health as well as its accountability and transparency. Despite the fallout from the Planned Parenthood defunding controversy, Komen continues to receive a high score of 63.57 out of a possible 70 and a 4-star overall rating.

Pink Inc. – Commercialization of the Breast Cancer Cause

To understand the success of Komen for the Cure, the “pinking of America,” as the New York Times referred to it in an October 2011 article, must be examined. Susan G. Komen for the Cure is synonymous with the pink ribbon that has become the official symbol of National Breast Cancer Awareness month, which is celebrated each October. In fact, the formerly-named Susan G. Komen Foundation is credited with the first use of the pink ribbon in the fall of 1991, when the organization handed out pink ribbons to participants in its Race for the Cure in New York City for breast cancer survivors. Susan G. Komen for the Cure took a cue from the yellow ribbons that were tied around trees by families waiting for loved ones to come home from serving in the Gulf War as well as the popular red AIDS awareness ribbons that generated a lot of buzz at the 1991 Tony Awards. Over the years, the organization has successfully tied the color pink to breast cancer awareness and made the pink ribbon an iconic symbol of support for those fighting the disease.

In 1992, the pink ribbon was adopted as the official symbol of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. That year, Evelyn Lauder, who was the senior corporate vice president at Estée Lauder and a breast cancer survivor, worked with her friend Alexandra Penney, then editor-in-chief of Self Magazine, to create a campaign in which the cosmetics giant distributed pink ribbons to their customers in stores in New York City to remind them about the importance of breast exams. However, with heart disease and lung cancer killing more women in the
United States than breast cancer, many credit Nancy Brinker of Susan G. Komen for the Cure with building the pink ribbon “brand” through savvy marketing, consumer merchandising and corporate sponsorships.\(^3\)

The linking of pink to breast cancer continued to grow and in marketing circles, the term “to pink” has become a verb that means connecting a brand or product to one of the most successful charities of all times.\(^3\) This has become a multibillion-dollar marketing, merchandising and fundraising opportunity that has led to the availability of not only pink and ribbon-logoed clothing and apparel, but also obscure items like pink Darth Vader helmets, car tires, eyelash curlers, toilet paper, mixers, pet food, M&M’s, Scotch tape dispensers, beer pong tables, cameras, watches, bikes, and much more.\(^3,7\) There are also partnerships with brands like New Balance, which has a “Lace Up for the Cure” promotion that donates five percent of retail sales of pink sneakers to Komen, with a minimum annual donation of $500,000. There is also Yoplait’s “Save Lids to Save Lives” campaign that has been going on since 1999 and has provided more than $22 million through a 10 cent donation per pink yogurt lid that consumers send in. And even Eggland’s Best eggs “went pink” in September 2011, stamping Komen’s pink ribbon logos on their eggs and pledging $50,000 to Komen.\(^3\)

Professional sports have even gotten into the game with pink NASCAR vehicles and Major League Baseball’s “Honorary Bat Girl” program, which asks for submissions on how fans “go to bat” against breast cancer for the opportunity to win a pair of free game tickets, be recognized on the field on Mother’s Day, and receive MLB pink ribbon merchandise that includes a pink bat.\(^3,9\) Perhaps most well-known and visible is the National Football League’s “A Crucial Catch” campaign with the American Cancer Society, which has players, coaches and referees wearing pink game apparel, on-field pink ribbon stencils, special game balls and pink coins – aimed at helping raise awareness for breast cancer.\(^10\) All of the NFL apparel is then auctioned off, with proceeds benefiting the American Cancer Society. Komen also has a separate relationship with the Dallas Cowboys in their headquarter city with similar themes, from pink goal posts to pink cheerleader’s pom poms.\(^3\)

Over the years, critics have claimed that this consumer approach to pink merchandising and cancer awareness is a “distraction” that is oversimplifying and packaging complicated medical information into emotionally appealing products and sound bites. They fear it makes wearing pink ribbon-branded gear (some of which isn’t even affiliated with breast cancer charities) a feel good, pop culture trend and another way to sell merchandise rather than finding a cure for cancer.\(^3\) Others feel that nonprofits such as Komen over promote the benefits of screenings and finance the medical status quo – annual mammograms- instead of investing in research that gets to the root of breast cancer causes and prevention.\(^3\)

**Selling out to the Colonel and Policing “For the Cure”**

Some of Susan G. Komen for the Cure’s past partnerships and choices have been controversial and have led to the organization being accused of “pinkwashing,” a term that refers to a company or organization claiming to care about breast cancer by promoting a pink ribbon product that is actually linked to or a known cause of the disease.\(^11\) In April 2010, Komen partnered with Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) for a promotion called “Buckets for the Cure.” For each pink bucket of grilled or original recipe chicken purchased, KFC donated 50 cents to Komen for the Cure.\(^3\) However, critics very quickly pounced on Komen for partnering with one of the leading purveyors of
fried food, especially when fried foods are known to contribute to obesity and other health issues and obesity has been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer. Additionally, the timing of this partnership announcement did not help, as KFC had debuted the sodium and fat-loaded, artery-clogging Double Down sandwich just a week earlier. Komen’s Public Relations team remained silent as the story went viral on social media and the public weighed in, with no comments on blogs or stories, nothing on Komen’s Twitter feed, Facebook page, website, or affiliate chapters’ websites. Eventually, Komen responded that the partnership with KFC allowed the organization to reach a particular demographic and many millions of women that they hadn’t been able to reach before that had never heard the message of early detection. While the campaign raised over $4 million in six weeks, Komen and KFC did not repeat the campaign after 2010. Komen’s perceived cause dissonance by the public, and the way it mishandled the communications, showed that Komen was not prepared to deal with the swift backlash through various channels and could be seen as a foreshadowing of its Planned Parenthood public relations fiasco.

Komen also came under fire for filing legal trademark oppositions to other charities for using the phrase “for the cure” or any variation of it in their names. Komen went after over 100 small charities, such as Kites for a Cure, Par for The Cure, Surfing for a Cure, Cupcakes for a Cure, Mush for the Cure and more. The organizations were also instructed to never use the color pink in conjunction with their fundraising. Komen’s lawyers claim that the organization tries to be “reasonable” when dealing with small charities and nonprofits, but that it “has a legal duty to protect its more than 200 registered trademarks.” However, critics think it has more to do with profits, which they say is ironic when the common cause is finding a cure for breast cancer, and that the high number of organizations Komen has gone after is something you’d expect from a giant for-profit company, not a nonprofit breast cancer organization.

Planned Parenthood

Planned Parenthood is the nation’s leading sexual and reproductive health care provider and advocate. For the past 90 years, the nonprofit organization has worked to improve women’s health and safety, prevent unintended pregnancies, and advance the right and ability to make informed and responsible choices. Planned Parenthood provides reproductive health care, sex education, and information to millions of women, men, and young people worldwide. The organization defends the right of individuals to make independent decisions about health, sex, and family planning.

Planned Parenthood’s roots go back to 1916 when Margaret Sanger, a nurse, opened the country’s first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York with her sister and a friend. At this time, women couldn’t vote, sign contracts, have bank accounts or divorce abusive husbands and they also couldn’t control the number of children they had or get information about birth control. Contraception was illegal and information about family planning was considered obscene because of the Comstock laws, federal statutes that criminalized contraceptives. Sanger had seen the pitfalls of this ignorance firsthand, as her own mother was a poor immigrant that suffered through 18 pregnancies, had 11 children and died at the age of 40. Sanger also saw the effects of sickness, misery and death resulting from unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion firsthand through her work. The clinic she opened provided contraceptive advice to poor, immigrant women. The clinic was raided by police and the three women
were convicted of disseminating birth control information, but Sanger appealed her conviction, which led to a more liberalized interpretation of New York’s anti-contraception statute. She also found The Birth Control Review, the first scientific journal on contraception, and in 1923, she opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, aimed at not only providing women with contraception, but also at collecting accurate statistics to prove the safety and long-term effectiveness of contraceptives. She incorporated the American Birth Control League that same year, an organization that embraced global issues of world population growth, disarmament and world famine. The two organizations eventually merged and later became Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc.

Since that time, Planned Parenthood has grown and now has 88 affiliates operating 840 clinics across the country. In 2009-2010, the organization cared for three million people in the United States, providing contraception to 2.2 million people, administering over 1.1 million pregnancy tests, performing 770,000 pap tests and nearly 750,000 breast exams and conducting over 4 million tests for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV. During that same time, STD testing accounted for 38 percent of the organization’s total medical services, with contraception close behind at 33.5 percent. Cancer screening and prevention came in at 14.5 percent and abortion procedures landed at three percent, with roughly 330,000 abortions performed each year. The organization also provided over $1.6 million in grants to 48 international partner organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, which allowed for the delivery of reproductive healthcare to more than 655,000 women and adolescents in 2009 and 2010.

Planned Parenthood has long been a target of protests, boycotting and funding cuts because it is the largest provider of abortions in the United States. While its affiliates provide an array of other services as previously outlined and abortions only account for three percent of their services, pro-life, religious and conservative groups are very vocal in their opposition to the organization, maintaining and publicizing boycott lists of companies that support or collaborate with Planned Parenthood.

**AT&T’s Defunding of Planned Parenthood**

Many parallels can be made between Planned Parenthood’s response to Susan G. Komen for the Cure’s defunding and AT&T’s defunding of Planned Parenthood over twenty years earlier. In 1990, AT&T suddenly announced that it would stop funding Planned Parenthood after donating to the organization for 25 years. The telecommunications giant had faced increasing pressure from pro-life groups over grants AT&T provided to Planned Parenthood that allowed for educational outreach to teens. In what could be described as a foreshadowing of the Komen situation, AT&T immediately became the target of a campaign orchestrated by Planned Parenthood aimed at pressuring them into restoring funding.

Planned Parenthood undertook a high profile national campaign, taking out full-page advertisements in major news outlets like the New York Times, Los Angeles Times and USA Today, which featured an attention-grabbing headline that read “Caving to Extremists, AT&T Hangs Up on Planned Parenthood.” The ads also featured a message that readers were encouraged to clip out and send to AT&T and readers obliged with an outpouring of support for Planned Parenthood. However, unlike Susan G. Komen for the Cure, AT&T stood by their decision and never restored funding to Planned Parenthood.
In an interview with two past presidents of Planned Parenthood, both leaders talked about the significance of the AT&T defunding and why the women’s health group launched such an aggressive response even though the AT&T grants may not have been significant financially, saying that the defunding sent an “encouraging signal to anti-abortion groups that their pressure tactics were working,” and that it provided an excuse for other companies to follow suit that were facing similar pressure from activists.¹⁸

**Political Climate**

Since the 1980s, congressional anti-choice Republicans have attempted to defund Planned Parenthood, despite the fact that no abortions are paid for using federal grant dollars.¹⁹ The topic of abortion and contraception and other women’s issues, including preventative health care coverage and domestic violence, took center stage in the 2012 presidential race.²⁰ In February 2012, controversy broke out over the Obama administration’s contraception-coverage mandate. The Republican Party worked to introduce legislation that would allow employers to opt out of medical procedures they object to on the grounds of religious or moral beliefs.²⁰ In mid-February 2012, a hearing was held on Capitol Hill to discuss whether the Obama administration had hurt religious freedoms through the mandate that health insurance companies cover contraception. The hearing drew outrage when photos and reports began to circulate that revealed the panel was made up of nearly all male witnesses, including Catholic bishops and men of other religions, discussing women’s issues. Planned Parenthood posted the photos to its Facebook page and asked supporters “What is wrong with this picture?” and swiftly received 2,000 comments and 5,000 shares.²¹ Two Democratic leaders walked out of the hearing to protest the fact that no women had been allowed to speak on the issue of birth control and religion.²² Additionally, Conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh caused even more controversy when he called a Georgetown Law School student, whose testimony was originally barred from the hearing but was eventually allowed to be heard, a “slut” for arguing that health insurance should cover contraception at religious institutions and pointing out that birth control can be used for medical reasons outside of preventing pregnancies.²²

Additionally, in the 2012 presidential race, early Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum repeatedly voiced his opposition to contraception and Mitt Romney came under fire after saying he wanted to “get rid” of Planned Parenthood, only to later say that he did not want to close the organization, but just wanted to strip it of federal money.²³ This political climate and heightened sensitivity around women’s contraceptive and reproductive rights provided the backdrop to Komen’s decision to defund Planned Parenthood.

**Komen and Planned Parenthood History**

Susan G. Komen for the Cure began its partnership with Planned Parenthood in 2005 and since that time, has been a target of anti-abortion groups, such as Life Decisions International, which has Komen on its “boycott list.”¹ Komen provided around $680,000 in grants in 2011 and $580,000 in 2010 to Planned Parenthood, which allowed the organization to provide breast cancer screenings and other breast health services through at least 19 of its affiliates.¹ In fact, Planned Parenthood’s centers claim to have performed over four million breast exams in the past five years, including nearly 170,000 that directly resulted from Komen funding.¹
In September 2011, Republican Congressman Cliff Stearns from Florida announced an investigation into Planned Parenthood in which he sought to determine if the organization was improperly using federal funds to perform abortions. He also inquired about potential violations of state and local reporting requirements and allegations of financial abuse. Many Democrats and Planned Parenthood supporters claim that the probe is an unwarranted political ploy, as many of the allegations in the inquiry were outlined in a report given to Stearns in 2011 by Americans United for Life, a national anti-abortion group that urged Stearns to investigate Planned Parenthood.

Breasts vs. Uteruses

In January 2011, Karen Handel, a former Republican candidate for governor of Georgia and prominent foe of abortion rights, joined Susan G. Komen for the Cure as a consultant and came on board full time in April 2011 as the organization’s senior vice president for policy. Handel had called for the elimination of government money to support Planned Parenthood during her unsuccessful 2010 campaign and many say she was influential in persuading the Komen board to change its funding policy. According to insiders, Komen for the Cure’s Board of Directors started talking about cutting the Planned Parenthood funding in October 2011 and unanimously voted to take action that would bar funding Planned Parenthood at the end of November.

The Board voted that a new rule would be instituted that would require all of its vendors and grantees to certify that they were not under investigation by federal, state or local authorities. According to Komen board member John D. Raffaelli, the decision was made because of fear that Representative Stearns’ investigation into Planned Parenthood and Komen’s relationship with the organization would damage Komen’s credibility with donors. Komen’s longtime support of Planned Parenthood had already cost the nonprofit some funding from anti-abortion supporters, but they feared that the federal investigation into the organization could impact donations. However, for Planned Parenthood, investigations of this nature crop up constantly and are a part of doing business.

According to Raffaelli, when Board members questioned who would be impacted by the new policy, Planned Parenthood was the only organization that was named among the roughly 2,000 organizations Komen funds and 16 of the 19 affiliates Komen had previously supported would be impacted. Komen for the Cure did not publicly announce its policy change decision, but told its 100-plus affiliates about the news. Shortly after and just days before the Christmas holiday in 2011, Komen informed Planned Parenthood. According to Cecile Richards, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, she was informed through a phone call from Komen president Elizabeth Thompson. Richards immediately sent a letter to Komen’s top leaders, including Brinker and board chairman Dr. LaSalle D. Leffall, Jr., and requested a meeting with the Board and claimed that Komen had misrepresented Planned Parenthood’s funding-eligibility status in some states. Richards received a brief letter of response that ignored the request for the meeting, defended the new grant criteria and said that the organization understood “the disappointment of any organization that is affected by these policy and strategy updates.”
Seeing Red (vs. Pink) – Timeline and Public Reaction to Komen’s Defunding of Planned Parenthood

On the afternoon of Tuesday, January 31st, the Associated Press broke the story that Komen was withdrawing funding from Planned Parenthood. A Komen spokeswoman said that Komen was forced to make the move due to a new policy that barred the organization from providing funding to groups under government investigation and cited Representative Stearns’ probe in congress. Planned Parenthood immediately responded that the organization was “alarmed and saddened” that Komen had given in to pressure from anti-abortion groups and had been influenced by a “politically motivated” Congressional investigation when the two organizations shared the common mission of saving women’s lives. Within hours of the story breaking, Planned Parenthood also sent an e-mail out to its supporters, asking for funds to replace the money Komen had pulled for breast cancer screenings for low-income women.

The reaction to the news by the public was very swift and passionate, as social media sites like Facebook and Twitter were immediately flooded with pro-Planned Parenthood and anti-Komen comments and the defunding decision continued to be one of the biggest-trending topics on social media into that evening. Twitter comments directed at Komen’s official twitter handle went unanswered and the organization didn’t post anything on its Twitter feed or Facebook page that evening or the next morning. In fact, the only action Komen took was deleting some anti-Komen comments on its Facebook page. One unfortunate partner, Energizer, whose sponsorship news happened to be the last post on Komen’s Facebook page, ended up receiving boycott messages on its own page, urging the battery company to rescind its support of Komen. Komen also didn’t mention the wave of criticism in a statement it supplied to the Associated Press that evening and only said that was "regrettable" that changes in priorities and policies affected its longstanding partner Planned Parenthood. Around 10 AM on Wednesday, February 1, Komen updated its Facebook page with a post that touted the work it had done in the past year and how it had implemented more “stringent eligibility and performance criteria” and how it is regrettable when “changes in priorities and policies” affect grantees, such as Planned Parenthood, but that it was critical to underscore that “the women we serve in communities remain our priority” and there would be no interruption in services for women needing breast health screenings and services. Later that day, Brinker issued a statement saying that Komen’s actions had been widely mischaracterized and the organization needed to set the record straight. She stated that in the course of reevaluating and strengthening its grant program, more stringent criteria had been implemented and Planned Parenthood simply didn’t make the cut. The statement did not reference the Congressional investigation that was the focus of Komen’s first media statement.

Komen then posted a video on both the organization’s site and YouTube in which Brinker sat in a library-like setting talking directly to the viewer. She again sternly stressed that she had initiated a review of grants and standards in 2010 that had led to changes that would allow the organization to do more to help women in the fight against breast cancer. Within the video, Brinker also stated that Komen wanted to provide funding to “the provider that’s actually providing a life-saving mammogram” and she also stated that “we will never bow to political pressure.” Brinker did not participate in TV interviews with the major networks. In contrast, Planned Parenthood’s Cecile Richards did interviews with all the major networks. Additionally, Planned Parenthood reported that they had received $650,000 in just 24 hours by donors reacting to Komen’s decision to cut off funding,
almost replacing last year’s grant from Komen. Planned Parenthood also launched a Breast Health Emergency Fund to ensure affiliates that would lose their Komen grants would still receive necessary funding.

That same day, Brinker and Elizabeth Thompson, president of Komen for the Cure, spoke with the Washington Post and Thompson said that the decision to defund Planned Parenthood “doesn’t really have anything to do with” the congressional investigation and instead had more to do with pass-through grants. Brinker went on to say that Planned Parenthood’s loss of funding had to do with the fact that they don’t provide mammograms to women, but only provide “pass-through” services, like clinical exams, rather than mammograms. However, at the same time, Komen Board member John Raffaelli was speaking with the New York Times and telling them that Komen changed its grant process specifically to end its relationship with Planned Parenthood because of fears surrounding the impact of the Congressional investigation.

On Thursday, February 2, Komen held a press conference in which Brinker continued to insist that the changes to the grant-making procedures were not targeted specifically at Planned Parenthood and didn’t have anything to do with politics or abortion. That same day, it came out that Mollie Williams, who had served as Komen’s managing director of community-health programs, resigned in protest immediately following the Komen board’s decision to cut off Planned Parenthood in December. Additionally, Deb Anthony, executive director of Komen’s Los Angeles County chapter resigned and Dr. Kathy Plessser, a Manhattan radiologist who served on the medical advisory board of Komen’s New York Chapter, threatened to resign from her post unless Komen reversed its decision.

Three sources also told The Atlantic that Karen Handel was behind the decision to cut funding and that Komen had wanted to distance itself from Planned Parenthood for some time and the Congressional investigation provided an excuse to do it. During a later interview with Fox News’ Megyn Kelly, Handel said that she acknowledges that she was “involved in the process” but to “suggest I had sole authority is just absurd.” That same day, Brinker participated in an interview with Andrea Mitchell on MSNBC in which she defended Handel and said she didn’t have anything to do with the decision and that it was made at the board level and wasn’t politically motivated. Also, twenty-six senators - including twenty-five Democrats and one Independent – wrote a letter to Brinker urging her to reverse the decision and reinstate the grants to Planned Parenthood. All seven of the California Komen affiliates also publically expressed their opposition to the organization’s new policies that prevented them from funding Planned Parenthood and sent a statement to California’s congressional delegation expressing their dissent. On Thursday afternoon, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg also took a side on the controversial issue, pledging that he would donate $1 for every new dollar Planned Parenthood raised, up to $250,000. Mayor Bloomberg said that “Politics have no place in health care” in a statement and took to Twitter to ask followers to contribute to Planned Parenthood and help him make his matching gift.

On Friday, February 3, Komen announced that it had reversed its decision and would amend its funding criteria to only disqualify investigations that are “criminal and conclusive in nature and not political.” The organization also apologized to the American public “for recent decisions that cast doubt upon our commitment to our mission of saving women’s lives.” That same day, Planned Parenthood announced it had raised nearly $3 million in just the past four days, more than enough to cover the $500,000 to $700,000 it had received annually.
from Komen and that it had acquired 10,000 new fans on Facebook.\textsuperscript{39} That same day, \textit{The Atlantic} released internal Komen memos dating back to December that included a Q&A for Komen employees that explained the new grant-making criteria (which had no mention of pass-through grants) and pointers and talking points for how employees could respond to questions about Komen cutting off Planned Parenthood funding.\textsuperscript{40}

On Sunday, February 5, the \textit{Huffington Post} reported that according to a Komen insider, Karen Handel was the main force behind the decision to defund Planned Parenthood and internal e-mails showcased how Handel seemed to have sole “authority” in drafting and implementing the new funding policy.\textsuperscript{41} From there, Susan G. Komen for the Cure began to experience some more fallout from the controversy that included a mass exodus of staff members, including Handel, Chris McDonald, a top executive at the organization’s Oregon and southwest affiliate, Katrina McGhee, executive vice president and chief marketing officer, Nancy Macgregor, vice president of global networks, and Joanna Newcomb, director of affiliate strategy and planning.\textsuperscript{42,43,44}

On February 9\textsuperscript{th} in a letter written to the \textit{Washington Post}, Brinker admitted she “made some mistakes” in how Komen “mishandled the situation” with Planned Parenthood and said she knew the organization would have to “work hard to restore your trust.”\textsuperscript{45} This was written in response to an open letter posted online the day before by \textit{Post} columnist Sally Quinn, who said she was “stunned” by the entire episode, that it was clear that Komen was “under enormous political pressure,” that she and so many people felt “betrayed,” and that Komen was going to have to “do a lot of work to repair that feeling.”\textsuperscript{45}

On March 22, LaSalle Leffall Jr. resigned as Chairman of Komen’s board, but will remain on the board at large.\textsuperscript{46} That same day, Dr. Dara Richardson-Heron, chief executive of Komen’s New York City affiliate, resigned from her post.\textsuperscript{47} The New York affiliate also announced that it had shelved plans for an annual fundraising gala because it was uncertain of its “ability to fundraise in the near term.”\textsuperscript{47} On March 26, Brinker’s own son Erik Brinker, a businessman, stepped down from the charity’s board of directors as well and the organization’s national vice president of communications, Leslie Aun, submitted her resignation effective in May.\textsuperscript{4,48} On March 30\textsuperscript{th}, Brinker sent a letter to members of Congress, apologizing for Komen’s mistakes during the Planned Parenthood debacle and asking representatives to support funding for the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) National Breast & Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program.\textsuperscript{49} Komen also quietly reinstated funding to Planned Parenthood again, with grants funneling out to Planned Parenthood and at least 17 affiliates in 2012, which is about the same number that received grants in 2011.\textsuperscript{50}

**Continued Fallout**

In June 2012, reviews began circulating for “Pink Ribbons, Inc.,” a documentary by Lea Pool that examined how a serious, deadly disease has become cheerfully wrapped in pink and commercialized with corporate tie-ins.\textsuperscript{51} That same month, Vice President Joe Biden and his wife Jill did not host a kickoff barbecue for Komen’s Global Race for the Cure in Washington, D.C. as they had in past years due to a “scheduling conflict” and U.S. Congressman Mike Honda declined to organize a team to participate in the race as he had done in previous years, which had raised over $10,000 and previously made him the top fundraiser for Komen’s most high-profile event of the year.\textsuperscript{52} Staffing turnover at Susan G. Komen for the Cure also continued with vice president of development Julie Teer leaving the organization in June.\textsuperscript{53}
In early August 2012, Susan G. Komen for the Cure came under additional fire by a group of doctors from the Dartmouth Medical School for using misleading statistics that overstate the benefits of mammograms and failing to tell women about mammogram risks in Komen’s public advertising campaign. Only a few days later, after months of calls for Nancy Brinker’s resignation, Komen announced that Brinker was leaving her post as CEO and would be taking on a behind-the-scenes management role and Komen president Elizabeth Thompson was resigning and would be leaving in September. At the end of August, Planned Parenthood also announced that it would be launching an initiative to fight breast cancer with expanded screenings and education, using the $3 million in donations it received from supporters following Komen’s decision to cut funding to the women’s health group.

In September 2012, Karen Handel, former Komen senior vice president of policy, released her tell-all book, “Planned Bullyhood: The Truth Behind the Headlines about the Planned Parenthood Funding Battle with Susan G. Komen for the Cure,” which claimed to give an insider’s look at how Komen became the target of a vicious, orchestrated “shakedown” by Planned Parenthood. Handel also went on a speaking and press interview tour, during which she rehashed the Komen controversy and focused the blame on both Planned Parenthood for “bullying” and Komen leaders for being too weak and reversing their stance.

In September, the New York Daily News reported that Komen continued to face dropping support of its Race for the Cure fundraising events across the country, with some of the largest events seeing significant drops including 25 percent fewer participants in New York City, 40 percent less in Washington, D.C., 11,000 fewer participants in an Indianapolis walk and a 50 percent decline in registration for the San Francisco walk.

(Pink) Head in the Sand – Komen’s Communications Strategy

What started out as an issues management case turned into a communications crisis and quickly led to a brand crisis, with Susan G. Komen for the Cure walking away from a bruising ideological fight that it clearly lost. The company’s mishandling of communications has been described as a self-inflicted public relations disaster by its own officials. Komen had public relations firm Ogilvy on retainer since summer 2011 and Komen’s internal public relations professionals at the corporate and affiliate level commented on the situation and released statements throughout the controversy, some attributed to themselves and some coming from Brinker.

Ironically, Ogilvy had also done award-winning rebranding work for Planned Parenthood. Initially, it was also suspected that Brinker hired her friend Ari Fleischer, former press secretary for President George W. Bush, to help her handle the crisis, but Fleischer quickly said he had only suggested that Komen get help from an outside crisis management firm but had no part in helping to guide Komen’s strategy.

Komen committed several crucial mistakes in its issues management and eventual crisis communications strategy. First, it didn’t anticipate the potential fallout from the organization’s decision or the reaction from Planned Parenthood. It must have had some idea that this decision could end up being controversial based on the internal Q&A and talking points documents that were distributed to employees in December that eventually leaked to The Atlantic. However, Komen seemed to underestimate Planned Parenthood and the organization’s intentions to quietly accept defunding of its breast screening programs.

Second, Komen did not seem to get complete consensus or check the pulse of different key stakeholders before making the Planned Parenthood defunding decision, as evidenced by those board members and affiliates
who publically came out in opposition to the decision, told different sides to the Komen defunding story and leaked documents to the press.

Third, Komen didn’t learn from its earlier mistakes. It had experienced a dress rehearsal when it dealt with fallout from the Kentucky Fried Chick partnership in 2010. In that instance, Komen also went dark and didn’t respond to the growing public outcry, allowing the public to define the dialogue and press stories instead of intervening and telling their reasons for the partnership. They also should have looked at Planned Parenthood’s history of responding to defunding and recognized the organization’s quick and savvy response to AT&T’s defunding in 1990.

Fourth, Komen didn’t control the message. The organization gave up the reins and let Planned Parenthood and pro-choice advocates take over the public dialogue on their decision and brand and essentially, allowed them to redefine the organization. By not breaking the story on their end and owning and controlling the dialogue, or by being very selective about how they delivered their messages – through prepared statements, postings on their website, videotaped message from their CEO and selective interviews with very limited media - they came across as very defensive.

Fifth, Komen changed its message and the reason for defunding multiple times and denied its ties to the abortion issue before reversing their decision. Had they led with their decision to eliminate funding to “pass through” organizations from the beginning versus changing over to that message after initially talking about defunding organizations under investigation, there still may have been public reaction, but the scope may have been different. Additionally, by continuing to act like they were not dealing with a red hot social issue, they came across as disingenuous about their political motivations.

Lastly, Komen underestimated the power and speed of social media and the significance of women’s rights to their supporters. Komen failed to respond quickly, consistently and frankly and lost an opportunity to be a part of the dialogue. Additionally, they came across as having something to hide by deleting negative comments on their Facebook page as they simultaneously ignored other comments and Twitter messages, showing they were watching but staying silent. Ironically, the last press release that was posted on Komen’s “In the News” section before the issue broke was a press release about recent CDC numbers that indicated that the gap between white and minority women is narrowing when it comes to breast cancer screenings, but the numbers still fall short of national goals and there is an urgent need to reach minorities and uninsured women, the very population that Planned Parenthood overwhelmingly serves.38

Komen hired Penn Schoen Berland (PSB) consulting firm in late February 2012 to determine how badly the crisis had hurt the organization’s brand and reputation.61 PSB immediately began assessing the damage, circulating 20-minute surveys to Komen supporters to gauge the fallout and asking whether respondents felt Komen still owed them an apology.61 Komen’s public relations team also began apologizing and demonstrating some transparency, saying they had “heard people’s concerns and taken them to heart.”4 Komen also communicated some changes the organization is making, such as reviewing its entire grant-making process and providing its affiliates a greater role by increasing affiliate representation on its national nine-member board to two directors (up
from one), and establishing an affiliate leadership council where local executives can work with national executives to review major policy and business changes.\(^4\)

One can also not ignore Planned Parenthood’s savvy handling of this issue, as they obviously had an aggressive plan in place that they executed on quickly, clearly and successfully. They had facts ready to go, participated in press interviews and were out front and visible. In the end, the organization turned a negative situation into an opportunity to raise even more money, strengthen their brand and rally support. Additionally, when Komen came out and reversed their decision and apologized, Planned Parenthood quickly voiced their appreciation and acceptance of the apology as well as their desire to move forward and continue to partner with Komen.

**Moving Forward**

How can Komen rebound from this blunder? The organization’s reputation is what is now at stake. In a Harris Poll EquiTrend Study in 2010, Susan G. Komen for the Cure ranked second among nonprofits in terms of trust, second only to St. Jude Research Hospital, and tops in brand equity.\(^62\) However, in Harris’ March 2012 study, Komen suffered a 21 percent drop in its brand equity, the second-highest drop in the study’s 23-year history, second only to Fannie Mae in 2009.\(^62\) The organization fell 54 spots to 56\(^{th}\) place out of 79 nonprofit brands surveyed in terms of brand equity and experienced a 27 percent decline in positive perceptions of its leadership.\(^62\)

Komen is now faced with the daunting tasks of restoring credibility and trust in what was once one of the strongest brands in the nonprofit world. The organization needs to bring pro-choice and pro-life women back together by apologizing, exhibiting humility and transparency, telling supporters how they’re going to change, proving that change with solid actions and getting the focus back on raising money to fight breast cancer.

One residual issue they may need to prepare for is their stance on whether abortion contributes to breast cancer, which is a theory that came to a head throughout this debate, with cancer supporters on the pro-life and pro-choice side arguing with each other. The organization also needs to clearly state that it will not take any sides, or the appearance of doing so, on any political issues like abortion in the future.

The long-term impact of the Planned Parenthood defunding debacle on Susan G. Komen for the Cure’s brand is hard to assess. However, given the organization’s long-standing reputation, the high level of esteem it was held in and the consistent support it received prior to the incident, if a corrected communications approach is implemented, the organization is likely to rebound. The organization will need to communicate a clear path for getting Susan G. Komen for the Cure back on track by focusing on breast cancer screening, education and a cure for the disease in a way that unites all women regardless of political stance. As Warren Buffett said, “It takes a lifetime to build a reputation and only 15 minutes to destroy it.”\(^12\)
APPENDICES:

Appendix I: Social Media Examples

Sampling of Anti-Komen Tweets:

KippiHax
9:01am via TweetDeck
RT @mrbabypants: @komenadvocacy @komenforthecure not another nickle, not another @YoplaitYogurt, not another step.

Mordabito
9:01am via UberSocial for BlackBerry
RT @sarahcolonna: RT @komenforthecure Our vision: a world without breast cancer. IF you can afford doctors we approve of. Otherwise, what’s!

MRNorrod
9:01am via Tweet Button
Tell @komenforthecure: Don’t throw @PPact under the bus! bit.ly/xTR5d8 @CREDOMobile #p2 #fem2

AmyhanavanRD
0:1am via web
@komenforthecure congrats on ur total failure to put women 1st. #PP will get all my $. Who u foolin w/the pink? UR RED all the way #cowards

eImaRD
9:01am via Tweet Button
RT @JennTaddeo Tell @komenforthecure: Don’t throw @PPact under the bus! bit.ly/xTR5d8 @CREDOMobile #p2 #fem2

Komen Twitter Handle During Controversy:

Tweets

Susan G. Komen @komenforthecure Via @FoxNewsLatino: Researchers discovered a case of prostate cancer in a 2,200y.o. mummy, the 2nd-oldest known case ow.ly/8LNzM

Susan G. Komen @komen: Reply Retweet Favorite Open Via @pbpost: Almost 20k walkers participated in the @KomenSouthFla Race for the Cure last weekend! ow.ly/8LNom
Komen Facebook Page During Controversy:

Example of Tweet Calling out Komen for Silence:

britt_ehrhardt
Jan 31, 10:23pm via Mobile Web

@NancySchwartz @kivlhm - I noticed that too! Just crickets over there at @komenforthecure - silence
Susan G. Komen for the Cure

At Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the women we serve are our highest priority in everything we do. Last year, we invested $93 million in community health programs, which included 700,000 mammograms. Additionally, we began an initiative to further strengthen our grants program to be even more outcomes-driven and to allow for even greater investments in programs that directly serve women. We also implemented more stringent eligibility and performance criteria to support these strategies. While it is regrettable when changes in priorities and policies affect any of our grantees, such as a longstanding partner like Planned Parenthood, we must continue to evolve to best meet the needs of the women we serve and most fully advance our mission.

It is critical to underscore that the women we serve in communities remain our priority. We are working directly with Komen Affiliates to ensure there is no interruption or gaps in services for women who need breast health screening and services.

Grant making decisions are not about politics--our priority is and always will be the women we serve. Making this issue political or leveraging it for fundraising purposes would be a disservice to women.
Planned Parenthood E-mail:

Dear Kim,

I wanted to share some extremely discouraging news from a partner and longtime ally for women’s health — news that could have devastating consequences for women in North Carolina.

The Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation has announced that it will stop supporting lifesaving breast cancer screenings for low-income and underserved women at Planned Parenthood health centers — including those in North Carolina.

It’s a deeply disappointing decision — made even more alarming because politically motivated groups and individuals determined to undermine women’s access to care appear to have successfully intimidated the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation to withdraw this critical support.

Over the past five years, Komen funds have enabled Planned Parenthood health centers to provide nearly 170,000 clinical breast exams and referrals for more than 6,400 mammograms. These cancer detection and prevention programs saved the lives of women who often had nowhere else to turn for care.

But when anti-choice groups began criticizing the Komen Foundation for partnering with Planned Parenthood, the foundation ended its support for Planned Parenthood health centers. We know our opponents put their ideology over women’s health and lives. What we never expected is that an ally like the Komen Foundation would choose to listen to them.

Please — if you can — make your emergency gift to Planned Parenthood in North Carolina today.

GIVE NOW

Breaking News:

The Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation has been pressured by right wing groups to stop supporting breast cancer screenings for poor women at Planned Parenthood health centers.

Appendix II: Internal Susan G. Komen for the Cure Memos

Updated Grant Criteria Memo:

December 16, 2011

To: Susan G. Komen for the Cure Affiliates

From: Elizabeth Thompson

Re: Important: Update to Grant Criteria - Effective January 1, 2012

Earlier this year, we began a review of our overall grants criteria, processes and performance standards. This is part of our broader effort to strengthen our grant-making process. We continue to focus on ways to build a more systematic way to measure our impact, better leverage national programs across the organization for greater efficiencies, and more effectively evaluate grant applications and assess risk prior to an investment. In doing so, there are several areas that we are addressing immediately.

In order to align the terms of the grant contract with our grant eligibility criteria and to ensure that our granting meets the highest standards, several important updates will become effective January 1, 2012. Specifically:

• Currently, a Komen grant may be terminated if, among other things, the grantee loses or changes its tax exempt status, is barred from receiving federal or state funds, or if we learn of any financial and/or administrative improprieties. Going forward, these same standards will now also be used in determining eligibility for Komen grants.

• Further, should Komen become aware that an applicant or its affiliates are under formal investigation for financial or administrative improprieties by local, state or federal authorities, the applicant will be ineligible to receive a grant. An organization may regain its eligibility once the investigation is concluded if the organization and its related affiliates are cleared of any wrongdoing.

• These updated eligibility requirements, as well as the specific related language in the contract template are required elements of all Requests for Application (RFA) and Grant Contracts going forward.

Please know we are not asking you to assume additional compliance responsibilities. The new eligibility criteria should be included in your Request for Application (RFA), so that these issues can be addressed at the time of application. Grantees will have the responsibility to notify you in the event that any action or activity has occurred that is covered in the contract.

We are confident that you will continue to exercise vigilant oversight of your grants, ensuring that performance standards are met and that your Grantees are fully compliant with the terms of the Grant Contract. In the event you become aware of a situation involving an applicant or a Grantee that is covered under these new criteria, please contact your respective ARM / ARS.

In the next few days, the updated Grantmaking Guide will be available on Affiliate Corner, along with the revised Grant Contract Template. Please review them carefully and ensure that the required eligibility and contract language is incorporated into your documents.

To assist in answering the questions you will have, please find attached:
• Grantmaking Guide Q&A that addresses various situations, such as what to do if you have already issued your RFA

• Template letter to notify organizations about the new criteria

• External Statement and Q&A reference document

• Template response for external non-media inquiries

If you have additional questions, please contact your ARM / ARS who will work with you and coordinate as needed with our Community Health and Legal Teams.

Please be aware that these new criteria will affect any number of organizations, including perhaps some that have been longtime partners. We are already aware of several, including a hospital in one community, as well as all Planned Parenthood Chapters. Planned Parenthood has been a longstanding partner with Komen in a number of communities. Currently, however, various authorities at both the state and federal levels are conducting investigations involving the organization and some of its local chapters, and the organization is barred from receiving government funding in numerous states. Under these new criteria, Planned Parenthood will be ineligible to receive new funding from Komen until these investigations are complete and these issues are resolved.

You may receive media inquiries regarding the impact of these new criteria and, in particular, regarding Planned Parenthood. Please continue to refer all media inquiries regarding Planned Parenthood to news@komen.org or to Andrea Rader directly at 972-701-2168. Additionally, other outreach—beyond that with applicants and grantees—should also be coordinated with the Headquarters Communications Team.

The decision to make these changes reflects our continued commitment to our mission and our obligation to ensure that our donor dollars are invested in the most responsible, impactful way possible. These new standards will strengthen our granting process and our overall community health program.

As always, I am grateful for your continued support and all that you do to advance our mission.

Attachments:
Grantmaking Guide
Q&A Reactive Statement and Q&A reference document
Template letters

Reactive Statement and Talking Points on Updated Granting Criteria:

Susan G. Komen for the Cure® Updated Granting Criteria
Reactive Statement and Talking Points
As of December 16, 2011
FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY

Officers and Directors: This document provides information about new granting criteria that Komen is implementing effective Jan. 1, 2012. Please do not forward this document outside of the organization, but do feel free to use the information in discussions with donors and other constituents. All media questions should be referred to Komen’s news desk at news@komen.org or at 972-701-2168.
Statement
At Susan G. Komen for the Cure, we work hard to ensure that we operate with the highest standards of integrity throughout our entire organization, reviewing our policies on an ongoing basis, so that we continue to serve as good stewards of the funds entrusted to us by our donors. We have recently updated our granting criteria to ensure that our resources are used in the most effective and efficient way to meet the needs of the communities we serve. Currently, a grant that Komen has made to an organization may be terminated if, among other things, the grantee loses or changes its tax exempt status, is barred from receiving federal or state funds, or if we learn of any financial and/or administrative improprieties. Going forward, these same standards will now also be used in determining eligibility for a Komen grant. Should Komen become aware that an applicant or its affiliates are under formal investigation for financial or administrative improprieties by local, state or federal authorities, the applicant will be ineligible to receive a grant. An organization may regain its eligibility once the investigation is concluded and the organization and its affiliates are cleared of any wrongdoing.

Questions & Answers
Q1: What prompted Komen to update its granting criteria?
A1: Each year, Susan G. Komen makes more than 2,000 community grants totaling nearly $100 million. As our community granting program grows and evolves, we continue to evaluate and update our granting requirements to ensure we are maintaining the integrity of the granting process. Donors trust us to make the most efficient, impactful investments with the dollars they contribute - one reason that Susan G. Komen has earned a four-star ranking from Charity Navigator for five years running. That trust is a reflection of our strong stewardship of the funds we receive to advance our mission.

Q2: How many organizations will be affected by this change?
A2: We don’t have a specific number at this time, as our Affiliates are currently receiving and evaluating applications for community grants for the next fiscal year.

Q3: Is it true that Komen is no longer making grants to Planned Parenthood?
A3: Under this tightened criteria, a number of organizations will no longer be eligible for Komen funding, among them, Planned Parenthood.

If asked for additional details about Planned Parenthood:
Our decision to fund any breast health program is based on a thorough assessment of community needs and resources. For several years, a number of Komen Affiliates have provided funding to various Planned Parenthood clinics exclusively for breast health services. Planned Parenthood has been a longstanding partner in these communities. Planned Parenthood has been a longstanding partner with Komen in a number of communities. Currently, however, various authorities at both the state and federal levels are conducting investigations involving the organization and some of its local chapters, and the organization is barred from receiving government funding in numerous states. Under these new criteria, Planned Parenthood will be ineligible to receive new funding from Komen until these investigations are complete and these issues are resolved.

Q4: On what basis is Planned Parenthood no longer eligible to receive Komen grants?
A4: Various authorities at both the state and federal levels are conducting investigations involving the organization and some of its local chapters, and the organization is barred from receiving government funding in numerous states. Under these new criteria, Planned Parenthood will be ineligible to receive new funding from Komen until these investigations are complete and these issues are resolved. Komen is making no assertions regarding these investigations or Planned Parenthood.

Q5: What other organizations is Komen no longer funding as a result of these tightened criteria?
A5: Our Affiliates are currently in the process of evaluating and awarding grants in which these criteria are applied. We will have more information on that as that process unfolds.

Q6: What happens if an organization is investigated and exonerated? Will Komen resume its funding?
A6: Once an investigation has been completed and the grantee has been cleared of any wrong-doing, it may regain eligibility to apply for a Komen grant.
Q7: Is Komen giving into pressure from the Catholic Church/anti-abortion groups/the political right in making this change?
A7: Komen’s decision to fund ANY grant is based on our mission priorities, a thorough community assessment, and strict eligibility and performance standards. Our granting criteria reflect our dedication to our mission and our consistent effort to invest our donors’ dollars responsibly in support of our efforts to end breast cancer.

Q8: Planned Parenthood provides health services in many of the nation’s poorest communities. How does your new policy align with your mission of serving women who lack resources to pay for important breast health services?
A8: Susan G. Komen is deeply committed to providing breast health services to women throughout the U.S. It is our belief that where a woman lives should not determine whether she lives. Komen provided funds for 700,000 breast screenings last year alone, and provided financial and social support to another 100,000 women, as part of our $93 million investment in education, public health outreach and service to vulnerable women last year alone. That work will continue. We believe these new standards will further enhance the integrity of our granting process and strengthen our overall community health program.

Q9: When does the new policy go into effect?
A9: The policy becomes effective January 1, 2012.

Q10: What about existing Planned Parenthood Grants?
A10: Any grant awarded prior to January 1, 2012, will continue under the specific performance standards and requirements of their existing contracts. These include 19 grants made to Planned Parenthood. After that date, any organization that does not meet these updated criteria will be ineligible to receive a Komen grant, including Planned Parenthood.

For additional questions, please contact Komen’s News Desk at news@komen.org or 972-701-2168.

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References


