"It really makes me sad," said Lamm, wife of former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm. "I kind of suspect there's a political agenda that got to Komen ... I hope it can be worked out."

The nation's leading breast-cancer charity, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, is halting its partnerships with Planned Parenthood affiliates - creating a bitter rift, linked to the abortion debate, between two iconic organizations that have assisted millions of women.

The change will mean a cutoff of hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants, mainly for breast exams.

Planned Parenthood says the move results from Komen bowing to pressure from anti-abortion activists. Komen says the key reason is that Planned Parenthood is under investigation in Congress - a probe launched by a conservative Republican who was urged to act by anti-abortion groups.

The rupture, which has not been publicly announced as it unfolded, is wrenching for some of those who've learned about it and admire both organizations.

"We're kind of reeling," said Patrick Hurd, who is CEO of Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Virginia - recipient of a 2010 grant from Komen - and whose wife, Betsi, is a veteran of several Komen fundraising races and is currently battling breast cancer.

"It sounds almost trite, going through this with Betsi, but cancer doesn't care if you're pro-choice, anti-choice, progressive, conservative," Hurd said. "Victims of cancer could care less about people's politics."

Planned Parenthood said the Komen grants totaled roughly $680,000 last year and $580,000 the year before, going to at least 19 of its affiliates for breast-cancer screening and other breast-health services.

Komen spokeswoman Leslie Aun said the cutoff results from the charity's newly adopted criteria barring grants to organizations that are under investigation by local, state or federal authorities. According to Komen, this applies to Planned Parenthood because it's the focus of an inquiry launched by Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., seeking to determine whether public money was improperly spent on abortions.

Cecile Richards, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, has depicted Stearns' probe as politically motivated and said she was dismayed that it had contributed to Komen's decision to halt the grants to PPFA affiliates.

"It's hard to understand how an organization with whom we share a mission of saving women's lives could have bowed to this kind of bullying," Richards told The Associated Press. "It's really hurtful."

Reaction to the news was swift and passionate. On Twitter, it was one of the most discussed topics Tuesday evening, with some tweets praising Komen's decision and others angrily vowing never to give to it again.

Two Democrats in Congress - Sen. Patty Murray of Washington and Rep. Michael Honda of California - issued statements denouncing Komen's action.

"I am stunned and saddened," said Honda, whose longtime chief of staff, Jennifer VanderHeide, had breast cancer last year. "I call on Komen to reconsider this decision, stand strong in the face of political pressure and do the right thing for the health of millions of women everywhere."

Anti-abortion groups, in contrast, welcomed the news. The Alliance Defense Fund praised Komen "for seeing the contradiction between its lifesaving work and its relationship with an abortionist that has ended millions of lives."

A statement issued Tuesday evening by Komen made no reference to the vehement reactions, instead citing its new grant-making criteria and pledging to ensure there were no gaps in service to women.

"While it is regrettable when changes in priorities and policies affect any of our grantees, such as a long-standing 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," the statement said.

Planned Parenthood has been a perennial target of protests, boycotts and funding cutoffs because of its role as the largest provider of abortions in the United States. Its nearly 800 health centers nationwide provide an array of other services, including birth control, testing for sexually transmitted diseases, and cancer screening.

According to Planned Parenthood, its centers performed more than 4 million breast exams over the past five years, including nearly 170,000 as a result of Komen grants.

Komen, founded in 1982, has invested more than $1.9 billion since then in breast-cancer research, health services and advocacy. Its Race for the Cure fundraising events have become a global phenomenon.

For all its mainstream popularity, however, Komen has been a target of anti-abortion groups since it began its partnerships with Planned Parenthood in 2005.

Life Decisions International includes Komen on its "boycott list" of companies and organizations that support or collaborate with Planned Parenthood. In December, Lifeway Christian Resources, the publishing division of the Southern Baptist Convention announced a recall of pink Bibles it had sold because some of the money generated for Komen was being routed to Planned Parenthood.

Aun, the Komen spokeswoman, said such pressure tactics were not the reason for the funding cutoff and cited Stearns' House investigation as a key factor.

That investigation, which has no set timetable, was launched in September when Stearns asked Planned Parenthood for more than a decade's worth of documents.

Stearns, in a statement emailed to the AP on Monday, said he is still working with Planned Parenthood on getting the requested documents. He said he is looking into possible violations of state and local reporting requirements, as well as allegations of financial abuse, and would consider holding a hearing depending on what he learns.

Many of the allegations were outlined in a report presented to Stearns last year by Americans United for Life, a national anti-abortion group, which urged him to investigate.

Democrats and Planned Parenthood supporters have assailed the probe as an unwarranted political ploy.

Komen, while not publicly announcing its decision to halt the grants, has conveyed the news to its 100-plus U.S. affiliates. Richards said she was informed via a phone call from Komen's president, Elizabeth Thompson, in December.

"It was incredibly surprising," Richards said. "It wasn't even a conversation - it was an announcement."

Richards subsequently sent a letter to Komen's top leaders - CEO Nancy Brinker and board chairman Dr. LaSalle D. Leffall, Jr. - requesting a meeting with the board and asserting that Komen had misrepresented Planned Parenthood's funding-eligibility status in some states.

According to Planned Parenthood, the Komen leaders replied to Richards with a brief letter ignoring the request for a meeting, defending the new grant criteria, and adding, "We understand the disappointment of any organization that is affected by these policy and strategy updates."

Aun, in a telephone interview, said Komen was not accusing Planned Parenthood of any wrongdoing.

"We want to maintain a positive relationship with them," she said. "We're not making any judgment."

Richards said Planned Parenthood is intent on raising funds quickly to replace the lost grants so that women in need do not go without breast-screening services. Already, the family foundation of Dallas oilman/philanthropist Lee Fikes and his wife, Amy, has donated $250,000 for this purpose, Planned Parenthood said.

The Komen decision was perplexing to Dottie Lamm, a Denver newspaper columnist and breast cancer survivor. She has done fundraising for Planned Parenthood, participated in several Races for the Cure, and serves on an honorary advisory council for the local Komen affiliate.

"It really makes me sad," said Lamm, wife of former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm. "I kind of suspect there's a political agenda that got to Komen ... I hope it can be worked out."

Stephanie Kight, a vice president with Planned Parenthood of Orange and San Bernardino Counties, said her affiliate in Southern California received a Komen grant for 2011 and was able to obtain an additional grant of $120,000 for 2012 by signing the deal with its local Komen counterpart just before Komen's new criteria took effect. Under the criteria, no further grants will be allowed unless the pending House inquiry is resolved in Planned Parenthood's favor.

Kight said her conversations with local Komen leaders indicated there was a shared sense of frustration over the national Komen decision.

"One of the things these organizations share is the trust of women across the United States," Kight said. "That's what we're concerned about - not losing the trust of these women, who turn to both of us at their most difficult moments."