

## Service Providers Laud Importance of State's Alternatives to Abortion Program

By Jen Reed  
*The Catholic Witness*

GRANTVILLE – In his annual update on the state's alternatives to abortion program, Thomas Lang, Director of Operations for Real Alternatives, shared a great deal of positive statistics with service providers who help pregnant women find life-affirming options to abortion.

Mr. Lang presented 2005-2006 statistics that ran a gamut from the number of women who called the program's hotline – 1-888-LIFE-AID – to the number of women who felt self-sufficient after receiving support from service providers.

But one of the most significant statistics he highlighted is the 3 percent decrease in the number of abortions in Pennsylvania in 2005.

"I thought that number was fantastic enough until I looked a little bit closer. It's the second-lowest amount in 12 years. That's fantastic news for all of us," Mr. Lang said in his presentation March 30, the second day of the two-day Service Providers Conference. The 12th annual event, hosted by Real Alternatives, was held at the Holiday Inn Harrisburg/Hershey. The conference featured a slate of various workshops as well as a keynote address by Helen Alvaré, an associate professor at Catholic University's Columbus School of Law and former Director of Information and Planning for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pro-Life Secretariat.

Based in Harrisburg, Real Alternatives administers the State Department of Public Welfare's Alternative to Abortion Program. Real Alternatives reimburses its 122 service provider sites – such as pregnancy centers and maternity homes – which provide free support for women who are pregnant or think they are and for those who are new mothers.

Support services include counseling, adoption information, assistance with food, shelter, clothing and healthcare, and education regarding pregnancy, childbirth, parenting and abstinence.

Since Real Alternatives' inception in 1996, there have been more than half a million visits to its service providers.

The Department of Public Welfare's current funding for Real Alternatives is \$5.5 million, an amount that Mr. Lang said needs to increase in order to continue

providing such urgent care for women and their children.

"When the funding increased in the early years [of Real Alternatives], we continued to serve more clients," Mr. Lang said. "When the funding flattened out, the number of clients flattened out. The data definitely backs up the fact that more funding is needed."

Real Alternatives' fiscal statistics speak to the success of the pro-life program. According to Mr. Lang, 99.6 percent of clients say they felt physically, mentally and emotionally supported from the services they received. An astounding 99 percent of clients had up-to-date immunizations for their children.

Numbers aside, service providers themselves also indicate the significance of Real Alternatives. Christine Folk, Executive Director of Mary's Shelter and Mary's Home in Reading, Pa., said funding for Real Alternatives is in direct correlation to the growth of the two programs she oversees.

Mary's Shelter, a maternity home, began 12 years ago with one religious sister who lived in the building and eight clients in the first year. With the assistance of Real Alternatives,

Mary's Shelter expanded to include Mary's Home, a two-year transitional housing program that helps women balance parenting, life skills, employment and college education.

"We currently have two sites, 15 employees and a host of volunteers, and we serve about 45 residential clients and 225 low-income families a year," Miss Folk said.

"We love Real Alternatives for the financial support that they give to us. It has allowed us to expand and help even more young women in our community. But it's not just about that," she said. "It's an opportunity for us as service providers to reach out and network with each other."

Diana Wert, Executive Director of Lifeline of Berks County, said the current status of the program is a stark contrast to its condition when she began working there some 10 years ago.

"When I first started at Lifeline, we had two staff members and we were in a building in which we rented four rooms," she recalled. "Through Real Alternatives,

we started seeing more and more clients because of the resources that they gave us. It was with those resources that we were able to add to our staff, add to the materials we use to teach women and eventually own our own building."

Lifeline of Berks County offers women emotional support and physical care during and after their pregnancy. Services include free pregnancy tests and ultrasounds, pregnancy and parenting education, and clothing, diapers, formula and baby furniture. Last year, the program assisted over 1,900 women.

With service providers at 122 sites across the commonwealth caring for nearly 17,000 clients this past fiscal year, those who attend Real Alternatives' annual conference rejoice in their life-affirming ministry.

"Sometimes when you're fighting for life, you can feel like you're the only one," Mrs. Wert reflected. "This gathering helps us to feel empowered and united and to know that everything that we're doing as a group has really made a difference over the years."

Amy Stoner is Assistant Director of Community-Based Services for Catholic Social Services in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, which oversees 16 service providers.

Some of the more innovative programs include one that provides abortion alternatives to female inmates, one that provides outreach and support to pregnant women and new parents with special needs, and one that invites pregnant women and new parents to prenatal and parenting classes at parishes.

"We're in some of the most impoverished neighborhoods," Mrs. Stoner said. "Real Alternatives is a perfect fit for our mission at Catholic Social Services because it is an integral part of our pro-life mission to serve women. We served over 2,100 women last year. If we had not received that support from Real Alternatives, we would not be able to have the number of staff that we do, we would not be able to reach out to as many women who need us. It's a critical component for us."