

Funding 'Real Alternatives' to abortion

By Susan Brinkmann
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PHILADELPHIA, Pa. (The Catholic Standard and Times) - Lauren McCormick of Oxford Circle in Philadelphia was less than three months along when she found out she was pregnant. Unmarried and only 20 years old, she could have gone the same route that thousands of other women had taken in similar situations, and had an abortion. But for her, that was out of the question. She wanted her baby, but she was going to need help.

"I was a first-time mom and didn't know anything," McCormick said. "This program provided me with all the information I needed on how to be a mom. They supplied me with so much useful information; I can't even sum it up in words. My daughter MaKayla is 7 months old and I still haven't paid for diapers."

While the road to the local abortion clinic is paved in taxpayer gold, women such as McCormick who choose another route often find themselves taking an unpaved path.

But not in Pennsylvania. Here, through a program called Real Alternatives, the state distributes \$5.5 million a year in taxpayer money to a state-wide network of pregnancy centers and maternity homes, including the Catholic Social Services-run program at Mater Dolorosa Parish in Philadelphia that served Lauren so well.

"Everybody wants to make abortion rare, but women need more than rhetoric," said Kevin Bagatta, president of Real Alternatives, which is based in Harrisburg. "They need real help," he said.

Real Alternatives makes sure they get it. Their centers offer women free pregnancy tests, childbirth and parenting classes, medical care, food, shelter, clothing, help to continue with their own education, and adoption information. Women who are pregnant, think they're pregnant or have a child under 12 months old, all receive those services for up to 21 months - from the moment of conception through 12 months after birth.

"What the government did is privatize this social service," Bagatta said. "It hired Real Alternatives to run this state-wide service, and lower abortion rates." Real Alternatives contracts with service providers that include Catholic Social Services, pregnancy centers, maternity homes and adoption businesses that meet its standards." Pennsylvania was the first 14 states that now provide funding to abortion alternative programs.

The program began in 1994, when Governor Robert Casey decided to divert half the state's annual funding for family planning services from abortion and contraception services to provide for abortion alternatives. "What Pennsylvania did here is not revolutionary, per se," Bagatta said. "Our state domestic violence program and rape crisis programs were created the same way. - 35 years ago, the state decided to fund them so they could grow and do more work."

In the Real Alternatives program, a network of 500 counselors who are employed by various providers are paid according to the number of women they serve. Since it began a decade ago, the program has assisted more than 100,000 women in a network of 128 centers in 47 of Pennsylvania's 62 counties.

In fact, its reach has almost doubled. When it began in 1996, some 6,700 women found help in 72 centers throughout the state. A decade later there are 128 centers that assist more than 16,600 women. Meanwhile, the percentage of women in the state who choose abortion has dropped from 22 percent in 1996 to 18.7 percent in 2005.

But the real success of this program is in its heart - not its numbers. Studies indicate that as many as 83 percent of women who sought abortions say they would have kept their child if they could have found even one person willing to help them.

"What we're trying to do at Real Alternatives is provide that one person to a woman in crisis - another woman, who works at one of these centers. It's about women helping women. So what this program really funds is love," Bagatta said.

An unplanned pregnancy can make a woman feel as if her hopes and dreams are gone forever. Usually abandoned and alone, she's especially vulnerable to suggestions to abort what abortion advocates consider a "blob of tissue," and get on with life. But there really are other choices and Real Alternatives counselors help women to see that, with the right kind of assistance, they can have their babies and still keep their dreams.

"What we help women to see is that a crisis pregnancy is not the end of their life - it's just a detour," Bagatta said. "They can still fulfill their life's goals - maybe not in the same timing that they originally wanted - but it doesn't have to be the end of their life."

That is what 23-year-old Vi discovered two years ago. She was living at home and studying to become a medical assistant when she suddenly found herself pregnant. Her strict, Asian-American parents asked her to leave rather than bring shame on the family name. "I began by living in a motel with the baby's father," said Vi, who requested that her last name be withheld.

"He was supporting us - but he couldn't seem to keep a job. I was about five or six months along when he left," she said. "I got in contact with a church, which gave me the number for the Salvation Army, which then referred me to Mary's Shelter."

Mary's Shelter, in Reading, Pa., took Vi in and gave her the medical and emotional support she needed. A month after her son was born, she was back in college, and she's now two years away from a degree in nursing. She can remain at Mary's Shelter until her baby is 2 years old.

Christine Folk, a registered nurse who has been with Mary's Shelter from the beginning, said the home was struggling to keep its doors open when the Real Alternatives program began. The program "was an opportunity for us to not just meet daily expenses, but to be able to expand and help more young women, because we had the funding opportunity to hire additional staff," Folk said.

Real Alternatives has also made a big difference for the centers operated by Catholic Social Services in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. "It enabled us to expand our programs in ways we never would have been able to do," said Amy Stoner, a licensed social worker for the Archdiocese.

She continued: "We were able to start a program in the Philadelphia prison system for women who were pregnant. We've been able to expand our services into parishes [and] parish communities, to provide specialized services to the Asian community in South Philadelphia, where many women don't have medical insurance. We've expanded our services in southwest Philadelphia, to help women with substance abuse and mental health problems, and we've been able to increase our presence in the Hispanic community in North Philadelphia."

Under President Bush's Faith Based Initiative program, religious service agencies such as Catholic Social Services can receive government funds, as long as the funded services and evangelization takes place at a different time and location. "As long as they keep evangelization work separate, we can fund the secular work," Bagatta said.

A father of five and a member of St. Joan of Arc parish in Hershey, Pa., Bagatta runs the program with the kind of standards one would expect from a former U.S. Air Force captain who holds an MBA and a law degree. It is his strong belief in the sanctity of life that motivates him, he said: "Certainly we're a better country than this - that the best we can do is offer a woman an abortion."

He pointed to a framed copy of a statement by the late Governor Casey, which sums up the purpose of Real Alternatives in a single sentence: "Our business is to fight the poison of hopelessness with love."

If you or someone you know needs help, tell them to call 1-888-LIFE AID (1-888-543-3243).