

Bill To Fund Alternatives to Abortion Introduced in Congress

By Liz Townsend

A Pennsylvania program that has helped over 26,000 women find alternatives to abortion is the inspiration for a new bill introduced in Congress September 21.

The Women and Children's Resources Act (WCRA) would provide \$85 million in grants to states, which would give the money to pregnancy help centers, maternity homes, and adoption services that do not perform, counsel for, refer for, or advocate abortion.

"Mother Teresa showed us that the most important thing we can do is to meet the needs of those in our midst, those on our street corner, those in our cities and towns, those who come to us for help," said Rep. Joe Pitts (R-Pa.), the bill's sponsor in the House, at a September 21 press conference announcing its introduction. "The Women and Children's Resources Act empowers those who are making a tangible difference in the lives of women facing an unplanned pregnancy."

Under the bill states would allocate the Federal funds to centers that provide "pregnancy testing, adoption information, prenatal and postpartum health care, diapers, baby food and clothes, abstinence counseling, and referrals for other services, such as housing, education, and job training," the *Associated Press* reported.

The bill is based on Project Women in Need (WIN), the Pennsylvania program begun in March 1996 by then-Gov. Bob Casey, a pro-life Democrat. Project WIN is funded by the state Department of Public Welfare, which contracts with an organization called Real Alternatives to administer the funds.

Real Alternatives president Kevin Bagatta said that in the three years since Project WIN began, the number of abortions in Pennsylvania has shown a steady decrease while the program has helped more and more women.

"If you want to lower abortions, you have to help these women," he insisted. "This is what a

compassionate country ought to do. The pregnancy centers offer counseling and support so these women know what their options are and know that they're not alone."

As a result of its success, the Pennsylvania state legislature has increased Project WIN's appropriation from \$2.1 million in the program's first year to \$4.2 million in the current fiscal year, Bagatta told **NRL News**.

Along with the increase in appropriations has been a steady rise in the number of centers involved in the program. In March 1996, 72 centers received funds from Project WIN. The number had jumped to 100 as of October 1999, according to Bagatta.

"The program has allowed existing centers to do three things: open more centers, stay open for more hours, and hire more counselors," Bagatta said. "The centers can devote their time to doing what they were set up to do helping women in distress."

How The Program Works

Pregnancy help centers that are authorized to receive funding from Project WIN send requests for reimbursement to Real Alternatives, which then distributes the government-appropriated money directly to the centers, Bagatta explained. The program is tightly monitored and audited by government agencies, just like any state program.

"We're a government contractor -- maybe the first specifically pro-life government contractor," said Bagatta. "We're fulfilling Gov. Casey's challenge to 'fight the poison of hopelessness with love' by offering a positive solution to women and their babies."

Real Alternatives also sponsors television advertising campaigns and a toll-free phone number to reach as many women as possible. Women in need can call 1-888-LIFE AID from anywhere in the state and they will be connected to a Project WIN center in their local area. Bagatta said that the hotline has also received calls from women

in other states and even in foreign countries who have seen TV ads on satellite broadcasts. The counselors connect these women with local centers, such as National Life Center in neighboring New Jersey or the worldwide network of Catholic Charities.

Project WIN and Real Alternatives are enthusiastically supported by pro-life groups across the state. "It's a wonderful and exciting program," Mary Beliveau, legislative/PAC coordinator for the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation, told **NRL News**. "It clearly shows that the pro-life movement wants to help women and that we're doing it every day."

Those who run the pregnancy help centers are also grateful for the assistance to the Pennsylvania program. "We're giving [women] options they never knew they had," said Amy Stoner, director of 12 Project WIN sites for Catholic Social Services/ Archdiocese of Philadelphia, at the press conference. "So many more women are given new choices through funding like this. I wish every state had the option we have. Millions more women would be served."

The proposed federal Women and Children's Resources Act would provide the funding to make this possible. At press time, 18 House members have co-sponsored the bill, and it has been referred to the House Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Health and Environment. In the Senate, sponsored by Sen. Rick Santorum, (R-Pa.), it has been referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

"WCRA offers compassionate, life-affirming choices and links women to a network of supportive organizations," said Sen. Santorum. "The legislation seeks to reach out to women, particularly low-income women, letting them know that they don't have to face this situation alone."