

More women, girls frequent state-funded centers that offer alternatives to abortion

Pennsylvania is the only state to finance private pregnancy facilities and mandate they not counsel about termination

By Jeanette Krebs
of The Patriot-News

HARRISBURG – Pregnant and considering an abortion, Mary Ann ended up at an unlikely place for help.

After thumbing through the phone book, she found the Morning Star Pregnancy Center in Harrisburg. The agency is one of several across Pennsylvania to receive state funding, which carries with it a prohibition on counseling about abortion.

Mary Ann, who asked that her real name not be used, said her beliefs are "somewhere in between pro-life and pro-choice." Even though the center's anti-abortion bent became clear, she stayed.

"[The counselor] really listened to me and I could tell she cared," said Mary Ann. "Even when I said I was thinking about an abortion, she just listened."

The college-educated Dauphin County resident eventually decided to carry her pregnancy to term. Today, at age 28, she is a single mother with no regrets. Thanks to a strong support system, she has been able to care for her 15-month-old son and keep her demanding job as a human services administrator.

An increasing number of girls and women, either pregnant or worried they could be, are turning to pregnancy centers such as Morning Star, facilities that are part of the state's alternatives-to-abortion program.

From March 1996 through April 1997, Project Women in Need centers served 6,768 clients from 53 of the state's 67 counties. That translates to 1,182 clients per month. Of that number, 500 were first-time clients.

Pennsylvania is the only state to fund privately run pregnancy centers and mandate that they not counsel on abortion.

The funding has been quietly administered by the state for seven years. It has never caused the kind of controversy Gov. Tom Ridge found when, three years ago, he decided to end a decades-long ban on state funding for contraceptives. But it does cause frustration among abortion-rights supporters.

"None of this money goes to health services, which is outrageous," said Sandi Vito, executive director of the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League of Pennsylvania.

"It is \$2 million that could be used for pregnancy prevention, maternal health care, and instead it is really being used to advance a political agenda."

Colleen Stauning, president of Morning Star, argues that the money is well-spent. The centers make referrals to physicians so that women get the health care they need.

In addition, she says the centers make certain their clients are receiving the emotional support necessary to get through an unplanned pregnancy. The centers provide baby supplies, food and clothing, if needed. Some clients have even asked their counselors to be their birthing coaches, she added.

"We care about their well-being. We care about the health of their babies," said Stauning. "This benefits the state because we make sure they know about prenatal care. We tell them to make sure their babies get their shots."

Under the direction of Gov. Robert P. Casey, a staunch abortion foe, \$1 million was first allocated in 1991 to promote options to abortion for pregnant women. Casey also wanted \$1 million to fund a contract for women's health services, such as cervical- and breast-cancer screening. Since then, the two areas have received matching funding.

In March 1996, Project Women in Need took over management of the alternatives-to-abortion contract. Since then it has created a strong network of 90 pregnancy centers, adoption agencies and maternity homes in 38 counties.

Many of the organizations have been around for years, said Kevin Bagatta, director of Project Women in Need. But now, he said, they get extra funding and a means of networking with other centers.

Bagatta said those who receive the state money are carefully screened. If they proselytize during their counseling, he added, they are rejected.

Since it took the contract, Project Women in Need has tried to get the word out about the centers. It created a toll-free referral number—1 (888) LIFE-AID—that patches a caller into the nearest Project Women in Need center.

Television ads began running recently in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and the Harrisburg area. Centers, such as Morning Star, say because of added funding, they have been able to lengthen their hours and hire more staff.

The centers serve low-income women, said Bagatta, and provide

counseling and information on pregnancy, adoption and nutrition.

But NARAL's Vito says it is unfair to women not to provide information on abortion, a legal option for women.

Counselors at the centers will explain the abortion procedure if asked by a client, said Pamela Pasquale, president of Project Women in Need's advisory board, but the emphasis is on explaining the viability of the fetus.

"A woman needs someone to do more than tell her her options. She needs someone to spend time with her," said Pasquale. "She needs someone to tell her about the baby growing inside her."

As part of that approach, clients are handed an object that represents an 11-week-old fetus. It is made of pink plastic and is the length of a tea bag.

Too many times, Stauning said, teen-agers and even adults don't think that the fetus is a living being.

For Carla, a Harrisburg resident, abortion was never an option. But when her teen-age daughter became pregnant, she needed someone to talk to. She called Morning Star and told a counselor that because of the circumstances surrounding her daughter's pregnancy, she wanted to get her out of the Harrisburg School District. As Carla looked at her options, she realized many were too costly and she feared her daughter would need to live in a home for pregnant teen-agers if she wanted to continue her education.

Before she had to make a decision, however, the Morning Star counselor called to say she had enrolled the daughter at a local private school at a lower tuition.

"It was so wonderful. I don't know what we would have done if it wasn't for the [the counselor's] help," said Carla, who also asked that her real name not be used.

Her daughter gave birth three months ago to a boy, and in September, she will return to the private school to complete her senior year.

"The thing that helped me get through this was knowing there was somebody to listen and to care about what was going on with our family," Carla said.