

'Real Alternatives' to Abortion

Project WIN Celebrates Seventh Year

By Jen Reed
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In the pro-life movement, volunteers and counselors who work to give pregnant women alternatives to abortion do so one case at a time.

They know that with each woman they support through a crisis pregnancy, the number of lives they touch becomes part of a life-affirming tally.

For those who minister at Real Alternatives' 124 pregnancy support centers throughout Pennsylvania, the number of women they have served in the past seven years tops 66,800.

For Real Alternatives' counselors, the women and babies represented in that number are not statistics or quotas. They are faces, names and stories. And they are lives.

"Women taking the time to listen to and support needy pregnant women is the best alternative to abortion," said Kevin Bagatta, president and CEO of Real Alternatives. "Our counselors know that an alternative to abortion is not a pamphlet."

Based in Harrisburg, Real Alternatives administers the State Department of Public Welfare's Alternatives to Abortion program, known as Project Women in Need (WIN). It reimburses its 124 pregnancy centers, adoption agencies and maternity homes that provide free support for women who are pregnant, think they are, or have a child under 12 months old.

Initiated in 1996 by former governor Robert Casey to promote options to abortion, Project WIN put Pennsylvania on the board as the first state to use government funds to support such a program. In its first year, Real Alternatives used the \$1 million allotted to Project WIN to oversee 72 centers,

which served 6,715 women. Since then, the program has grown in funding, services, agencies and clients.

With each new state budget, the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (PCC) works to ensure funding for another year. "It's important for the PCC staff to show that Project WIN is a valuable program for the women and children of this state," said Fran Viglietta of the PCC's Department on Social Concerns.

This year, the Department of Public Welfare set aside \$5.3 million, which includes \$1 million in funds from the federal welfare reform program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Former governor Mark Schweiker was the first to tap into federal TANF funds for Project WIN.

"As the program has proven its worth and its value by providing realistic alternatives to women who do not wish to abort their child, the funding, in effect, has followed," Mr. Viglietta remarked. "It's a successful program that has demonstrated success, and the Commonwealth has tried to be as generous as possible in terms of funding it."

Mr. Bagatta noted that because Pennsylvania was the first state to use both state and federal funds for an alternative to abortion program, it has become the model for similar programs throughout the country.

He said a number of states are interested in replicating Pennsylvania's program. He has met with members of government, Right to Life groups and Catholic conferences in Michigan, Wisconsin, Kansas, Missouri, Louisiana, Florida, Nebraska, Iowa, Georgia, North Dakota, Ohio and Tennessee.

In addition, because of the success of Project WIN, Congress

introduced the Women and Children's Resource Act in 1999. The legislation, HR 2901, is modeled after Pennsylvania's Real Alternatives program.

"We're thinking big. Our goal is to help implement this in every state," Mr. Bagatta said. "If it can work here, why can't it work elsewhere? Isn't this what we're supposed to do? Isn't this the best way to handle a crisis pregnancy?"

Real Alternatives sites – which include Catholic Charities offices – provide free pregnancy tests, counseling, shelter, food, clothing and infant care items. They also provide educational material on parenting, health and adoption, and refer clients to supportive agencies for education and career assistance, medical care and health insurance.

A toll-free patch system – 1-888-LIFE-AID – puts a woman directly in touch with a counselor in her area, 24 hours a day. With sites in 49 of the state's 67 counties, there is a pregnancy support center within 45 minutes of any location.

"Our counselors realize that if you provide a woman in a crisis pregnancy with an alternative to abortion, and you stay with her for support, she will likely choose life," Mr. Bagatta said.

One woman at a time, Real Alternatives and Project WIN are spreading the life-affirming message across the state and into the nation.

"If you help save one baby, you allow many more children to be born," Mr. Bagatta remarked. "If you avert one woman from post-abortion syndrome, you save families from heartache. If you turn one woman around from her risky lifestyle, you change her health. Our counselors are doing things that will affect the future. That's humbling."