

Call waiting

ABORTION: A new hotline tries to cool down a rising abortion rate in Florida | *Jamie Dean*

When Kizzy Coleman walked into the Women's Help Center in Jacksonville, Fla., six years ago, she faced a true "crisis pregnancy": At 21 years old, Ms. Coleman was the mother of two children, she was in an abusive relationship, she had just been evicted from her home, and she had just learned she was pregnant.

Counselors at the pregnancy care center told Ms. Coleman the facts about abortion and urged her not to abort her unborn child. Instead, they counseled her to consider parenting or adoption, and offered resources to help with either choice. Ms. Coleman chose parenting; her daughter, Annicea, is now 5 years old.

Earlier this month, Ms. Coleman and Annicea joined Florida Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings at the Women's Help Center to announce an initiative that would provide \$4 million to encourage women facing unplanned pregnancies to carry their unborn children to term. The proposal by Gov. Jeb Bush's administration includes a toll-free hotline to connect women with organizations that present alternatives to abortion, as well as to parenting classes and other assistance for up to a year after a child is born.

Lt. Gov. Jennings told WORLD that Florida's high abortion rate makes the Pregnancy Support Services Program necessary. "More than 217,000 babies were born in Florida last year, while more than 93,000 were aborted. That means roughly one out of every three pregnancies ended in abortion," she said. "That's obviously a scary figure."

Informing women about abortion alternatives is one way to reduce a Florida abortion rate that has increased by nearly 7 percent since 2001, according to Ms. Jennings. "This is about awareness and providing women with a lifeline," she said.

Pro-abortion groups have denounced the proposal. The St. Petersburg Times quoted Clarice Pollock, president of the National Organization for Women in Florida, as saying the initiative was about "making women walking wombs." And, although Planned Parenthood is the leading provider of abortions in America, Stephanie Grutman of the Florida Association of Planned Parenthood Affiliates told The Orlando Sentinel

that "we would never provide a woman with one-sided information."

Ms. Jennings rebuffed the pro-abortion criticism: "The other side of the story gets told well and often. This side of the story needs to be told as well."

Florida will model its initiative after Real Alternatives, a pro-life, state-funded Pennsylvania program. Real Alternatives operates a toll-free hotline and distributes funding for pro-life counseling to 32 service providers at 128 sites across Pennsylvania. The group's president and CEO Kevin Bagatta said that Real Alternatives serves more than 20,000 women a year and that the program has a site within 45 minutes of every woman in the state. Florida's program would operate similarly, according to Ms. Jennings.

Kurt Entsminger, president of Care Net, a nonprofit organization that oversees a national hotline and a network of more than 800 pregnancy care centers, expressed cautious optimism about the Florida initiative, saying care centers should make sure that accepting government funds won't compromise their evangelistic goals.

Mr. Entsminger told WORLD that in the past Real Alternatives "has excluded evangelical centers all together." Mr. Bagatta said that's because until last summer federal guidelines prohibited the group from distributing funds to "centers that proselytize." Under new guidelines from the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, Mr. Bagatta said Real Alternatives would be able to include evangelistic care centers, as long as counselors separate pregnancy counseling from evangelism sessions.

Mr. Entsminger said he's pleased with the development and hopes the same thing could happen in Florida. "We're not asking the government to pay for our religious activities," he said. "But we do want to see programs that allow for maximum participation from all pregnancy care centers, including centers committed to evangelism."

Lt. Gov. Jennings said the Florida program would aim for maximum participation. When asked if the Bush administration would have any reservations about explicitly evangelistic centers, Ms. Jennings replied: "Are you kidding? Not this administration."