

Love and Let Live: Providing Real Alternatives to Abortion for Women

By David Bunnell

An interview with Kevin Bagatta, Director of Real Alternatives

What follows is *LifeLines* editor David Bunnell's exclusive interview with Real Alternatives Director Kevin Bagatta. Real Alternatives is Pennsylvania's state-funded network of alternatives to abortion services.

Q. Tell us a little bit about your background and how it enables you to lead Real Alternatives.

A. I think, most important was my family background.... My brothers and I were taught that every life has value before God. My parents, you know, are both handicapped, and they not only talk about the value of life—they live that value. When *Roe v. Wade* came down, we were taught what abortion was and that every life, even unplanned, has value and that abortion is bad for the woman, bad for the unborn child, and bad for the country.... But it wasn't just "Abortion is bad—end of conversation" It was "Our country—the greatest country in the world—needs to help those women." My Dad wasn't just talking, either. He would help at Birthright in Long Island.... So, I knew about providing alternatives to abortion when I was 11 or 12.

Birthright will surely have a chapter written about it when we write the book about how abortion was ended. They were the top of the spear. I also want to give credit to two other organizations. This is the brainchild of the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation and the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference. In a way, you guys are our parents.

(Kevin went on to earn a degree from NC State University, an MBA from the University of North Dakota, and a law degree from Widener. He also served in the Air Force and was commissioned Second Lieutenant, worked in the Pentagon as an ICBM missile launch officer, and clerked for a Harrisburg law firm.)

There is not a day in this job that I don't use the skill of (those things). I look back on everything and realize I was being prepared for THIS.

Q. What, in a nutshell, is the mission of Real Alternatives?

A. To provide life-affirming practical alternatives to abortion for women, so they don't have to choose to abort their baby.... You realize no one wants to have an abortion. And we try to address the factors forcing or urging her to abort. When we do that, with love, they choose not to abort. When they don't feel alone, they don't abort.

Q. What does the future hold for this program?

A. Everybody looks to our program in Pennsylvania as a wonderful model, and we're very happy. We're serving more than 12,000 women a year, but resident abortions are still about 32,000. So from Real Alternatives' perspective, there's still much left to accomplish.

It's not just me, either. We have 11 people who work here who wake up every morning to think up new ways to help women and educate them so they don't have to abort.

Everything we do is being tested for the rest of the country. Pennsylvania is the laboratory for a national program like this one. Our grander vision is to take this success and export it throughout the country. Every woman in America should be provided the love and compassionate care she needs to not choose abortion.

Q. What would you tell pro-life citizens who might be fearful of this kind of program because they come from a fiscally conservative worldview?

A. Government funding of alternatives to abortion is not a totally new idea—the concept of government using its resources to help people that are in crisis is not new. When the government was educated on domestic violence and the special support needed in rape crisis situations, they looked to see who was helping. Government realized that if we can provide these agencies with more resources, more citizens can be helped.

A crisis pregnancy greatly affects a woman. Since 1969 community agencies have been reaching out. Government is understanding its responsibility to provide resources to help as many women in crisis pregnancies as possible.

Fiscal conservatives will be glad to know that our program doesn't operate on a grant basis, but a fee-for-service basis. We don't just give money out. This is a program that requires performance and accountability of its providers. Instead of receiving grants and reporting after the fact, our centers sign a contract with Real Alternatives that allows them to receive the funding after they earn it. If they don't provide real help to women in need, they don't get reimbursed. We use modern business

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practices to meet the demand for alternatives to abortion.

Q. You mentioned taking the program nationally. Do programs like Real Alternatives fit in well with President Bush's "faith-based initiatives" for social programs?

A. The Pennsylvania program clearly is one of the largest programs that already funds religious-based organizations. We fund Catholic Charities. We fund Bethany Christian Services. We've proven that you can constitutionally fund faith-based programs.

We fund 110 centers, but those who provide more religious counseling choose not to participate in this government-funded program. We stand shoulder to shoulder with them, offering compassionate alternatives to abortion. For women who need religious counseling, thank God those centers are there. For women who don't seek that, thank God we're here.

Q. What can the average President & CEO-life reader of *LifeLines* be doing to help pregnant women in need in the local communities?

A. Start by looking in the Yellow Pages under "Abortion Alternatives." Call and ask to speak to the executive director. Ask her what they need—maternity clothes, baby food, maternity clothing, baby clothes? Also, they always need donations for local advertising and other things.

If you have children in school in junior or senior high, make sure the guidance counselors and administrators know that all a student in Pennsylvania who is experiencing a crisis pregnancy has to do is call 1-888-LIFE-AID for DPW-funded alternatives to abortion services.

Q. What kind of circumstances are being faced by the typical client?

A. We see three basic types of clients. The first is women who think they are pregnant, but aren't really. We offer them abstinence education, STD info, self-esteem counseling, and other services to convince them to change their lifestyle behavior—so they don't have to walk through our door again, or Planned Parenthood's. We don't accommodate risky lifestyle behavior. We try to change it.

The second type of client comes to us pregnant. We give her a whole lot more types of support. They might be abortion-minded, abortion-vulnerable, or women who really wouldn't consider abortion but really need our help.

They get crisis pregnancy counseling—which in part is just taking the time to listen. An alternative to abortion is not a pamphlet; it is a counselor meeting each woman where she is to walk her through her individual crisis. The counselor finds out what the stresses are in her life and provides the tools, the mentoring, and the support for her to solve her problem. We give them the tools for them to solve their own crisis.

The third category—a woman who has already had the baby, but now the crisis pregnancy has turned into a crisis parenting situation that she needs help on. They have chosen life and deserve our support.

Q. Does Pennsylvania have reason to be proud of such a groundbreaking program?

A. I'm very proud to now be from Pennsylvania. As I travel to other states interested in replicating this program, I'm reminded how proud we should be as Pennsylvanians who continually advance the cause of helping women in need with crisis pregnancies.

**Real Alternatives'
Record of
Accomplishment**

Closing comments from David Bunnell:

Five and one-half years ago, the program of publicly funded alternatives to abortion was formed. Prior to that, the government gave money to "help" women in crisis pregnancies only to organizations like Planned Parenthood that do abortions. Pennsylvania broke new ground by instead giving some money to agencies that provide life-affirming alternatives.

Real Alternatives started out with 72 centers across the state. Now there are 110. The local centers keep growing, because money received from the state program as reimbursement is reinvested into programs that save women and their children from the destructiveness of abortion.

In its first year, Real Alternatives served 6,715 women. Last year, they helped 11,397, and in the current year that number is expected to exceed 12,000.

In the past four years more than 40,000 women have been helped. That's 40,000 women whose babies might otherwise have been killed at a Planned Parenthood facility. If that's not a good result of spending tax money, I don't know what is.