

In Pennsylvania, the Future of the Pro-Life Movement?

Crisis pregnancy centers, supported by the state may be a model for the nation

By Joseph Esposito
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HARRISBURG, Pa.—A quiet but powerful revolution taking place in Pennsylvania may be reshaping the future of crisis pregnancy centers and, quite possibly, the pro-life movement. The state is the first in the country to provide public funding for abortion alternatives, and the program has saved lives and expanded pro-life services. Rep. Joseph Pitts (R-Pa.), an advocate for the program when he served in the Pennsylvania legislature, believes the concept can be used on a national basis.

Since 1995 the legislature has appropriated money to reimburse pregnancy centers, adoption agencies, and maternity homes for services provided. This year \$3.1 million is available for such services as long as "they shall not promote or refer to perform abortions or engage in any counseling which is inconsistent" with the pro-life program, according to the statute. The program is supervised by the state Department of Public Welfare and administered by a nonprofit contractor, Real Alternatives.

Real Alternatives has designated the program Project Women in Need (Project WIN), and this initiative has created a growing network of 90 centers around the state that provide pro-life services. This represents nearly half of the state's 193 crisis pregnancy centers, maternity homes, and adoption agencies. For a center to become a subcontractor and enter the system, it must meet rigid criteria, including disavowal of any religious proselytizing. The centers, in return, are reimbursed at specified rates for counseling, referrals, material assistance,

pregnancy test kits, and education classes.

The director of Project WIN, Kevin Bagatta, said, "For more than 20 years these centers have been doing the best they can on their own. Project WIN is their unifying force. Now they are a force." Bagatta, an unabashed pro-life Catholic, emphasizes that the program runs like a business. He said, "We are in the pro-life business. We provide a charity, but we are in business."

The project is administered by 11 employees who operate a headquarters in Harrisburg, the state capital, and three regional offices in Philadelphia, State College, and Pittsburgh.

Funds disbursed by Project WIN provide centers with a steady income flow to add to any private money they receive. This additional source of revenue has allowed centers to give more material help, hire more staff, expand operating hours, and open additional offices. As a result, more women in crisis are being assisted, often up to one year after giving birth. Bagatta said, "How did we increase our client base by 30%? Why did the number of clients' visits increase by 46 percent? Money, that's why."

While this money has provided an important boost to pro-life efforts, the state also funds contraceptive programs. In fact, each initiative is funded at the same level, \$3.1 million, and each received identical increases this fiscal year. Such an appeal to parity, however, has not diminished the significance of the breakthrough for the pro-life movement.

One of those thankful for Project WIN is Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Harrisburg, a program subcontractor. Its director of adoption services, Kay

Eisenhour said, "Project WIN has been a positive thing. More agencies and clients are now aware of the services we can provide, so we can reach more people. When a crisis situation hits a woman, she now has more places to turn."

Eisenhour listed some of the many benefits gained with the program's help. A caseworker is now able to travel more widely throughout the 15-county diocese. Lourdes House, a maternity home in the Harrisburg suburb of Enhaut, is able to provide more food, cribs, car seats, strollers, and maternity and baby clothes. The overall case load has increased and infant adoptions have more than doubled. Since receiving aid through Project WIN, Catholic Charities has been able to rely less on the annual Lenten Appeal, whose funds can now go elsewhere.

Project WIN aggressively advertises its services through television and yellow page advertisements and an Internet Web site. Whenever a Pennsylvania resident calls the toll-free referral line, 1-888-LIFE-AID, she is immediately transferred to the appropriate local center for help. More than 13,000 clients were served between March 1996 and March 1998. The centers are located in 42 counties, but advertising has led to women from 57 of the state's 67 counties being assisted.

An especially important source of Project WIN's visibility has been television advertising. Campaigns were run in each of the state's five major media markets over the past year, beginning with Philadelphia in May 1997. Bagatta, who has law and graduate business degrees, emphasizes that significant marketing research went into creating a variety of ads, which

appeal to single women, boyfriends, girlfriends, and mothers. Some ads were done using student volunteers from a local Catholic high school and others were done professionally.

In addition to attracting clients to the pro-life message and providing funds for it, the program also emphasizes technical support. Catholic Charities' Eisenhour said, "They have provided us with excellent educational material which can be used with clients." In addition, it maintains accurate statistics, produces a newsletter, and holds an annual conference. The 1998 conference, held over two days last month, had as its theme "Empowering Women with Real Alternatives." Last year's conference featured former Gov. Robert Casey.

Casey, a staunch pro-life Democrat, signed the bill into law during the last year of his administration. Support has continued with Gov. Thomas Ridge, a Republican, and through the Republican-controlled legislature. Congressman Pitts, who was chairman of the House Appropriations Committee when he served in the state legislature, was a prime mover of the bill, which drew strong pro-choice opposition. Three years after initial enactment, he continues to be enthusiastic about the impact of a government-fee-for-services program to aid the pro-life movement.

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As a result of the success in Pennsylvania, Pitts is meeting with groups to create a similar program at the national level. He expects to introduce a bill in the next session of Congress.

Francis Viglietta of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference calls Project WIN "an outstanding program." He said, "There are basically two ways of dealing with the pro-abortion faction. The first way is to take away some of their money and the second way is take away their clients. Project WIN does both." He added, "I'd love to see it replicated on the national level."

While not specifically a Catholic program, Project WIN does have broad Church-related support starting with the statewide Catholic Conference, which represents Pennsylvania's eight Latin Rite and two Byzantine Rite dioceses. Many of the subcontractors are diocesan Catholic Charities offices. A chastity component, which includes a training seminar for counselors on chastity education, clearly supports Church teaching. Bagatta added, "Some people try to accommodate behavior. Our aim is to modify behavior." In addition to these Catholic connections, endorsements have come from a wider circle.

One highly supportive organization is the Pennsylvania Family Institute, a state associate of Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family. The institute's president, Michael Geer, said, "The success of Project WIN and programs like it will show the falsity of government spending which promotes abortion, distribution of contraceptives, and so-called 'comprehensive sex education.' Opposition to these programs is based on fear that their effectiveness will win converts to the pro-life, pro-family side."

Although the Pennsylvania Family Institute is decidedly pro-life, it is also cautious of government intervention in social

issues. In addition to the prospect of waste, Geer emphasized his concern that even worthwhile public funding could displace charitable involvement. He argues, "We win our strongest and most fervent allies in the [pro-life] fight when they are personally involved in helping the woman in need—and their boyfriend or spouse—whether it be through counseling, providing shelter or material needs, or giving of money to local groups which meet those needs."

Nevertheless Geer believes the evidence has shown that Project WIN, which his institute has endorsed since its inception, has lived up to its expectations by being "a quality-run program." He reasons, "There is a real incentive for people who run Project WIN to be efficient as well as effective because they know there are real political enemies who will be looking at what they do—looking for any misstep to discredit the program."

Project WIN will continue to be scrutinized by pro-choice activists, and even supporters recognize that government-funded programs are susceptible to shifting political tides. But as this concept attracts wider national attention, it may become an important tool in the pro-life struggle. Ultimately, though, Bagatta said his goal is "to be out of business" when abortions are no longer performed in America and there is no need to provide alternatives.

Joseph Esposito writes from Springfield, Virginia