

ZENIT – The World Seen From Rome

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Finding Real Alternatives to Abortion

Interview With Official of Pro-life Government-Funded Agency

HARRISBURG, Pennsylvania, APRIL 19, 2007 (Zenit.org).- In 1995, Pennsylvania started a bold, state-funded initiative to reduce the number of abortions by providing pregnant women the necessary resources to keep their children.

In this interview with ZENIT, Kevin Bagatta, president & chief executive officer of Real Alternatives, (www.realalternatives.org/aboutus), discusses the Pennsylvania Alternative to Abortion Services Program and how it has helped abortion rates in the state to fall steadily.

Q: How did you get involved in Real Alternatives?

Bagatta: My three brothers and I were born and raised on Long Island, New York. Both of our parents are handicapped. My Italian-American dad, a World War II veteran, walks with cane and a brace and my Irish-American mom became paralyzed with polio during the polio epidemic.

They both taught us -- and still do -- the true value of life. Having watched the culture of death practiced by Nazi Germany, they immediately explained to my brothers and I how wrong the Roe vs. Wade decision was that legalized abortion in America and the ill effects it would have on our country.

Q: Real Alternatives seeks to encourage childbirth instead of abortion. How did it begin?

Bagatta: In 1994, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey placed alternative to abortion services program funding in the state budget.

In 1995, I answered an advertisement in the local newspaper from a pro-life organization looking for a director to start a statewide government-funded program.

Real Alternatives was established to be the statewide administrator of the Pennsylvania Alternative to Abortions Services Program [PAASP].

With a dedicated staff of 12 and nine board members, we contract with 120 service providers made up of pregnancy support centers, social service agencies like Catholic Charities, adoption agencies and maternity homes throughout the state to reach out to women in unplanned or crisis pregnancies.

The concept of government-funded social services is not new.

Well over 30 years ago, the state saw nonprofit charitable agencies that served women who were in a unique crisis either due to domestic violence or rape, and decided to fund them so they would provide more service and reach more women.

With PAASP, the state saw nonprofit charitable agencies serving women who uniquely experience another type of crisis -- an unplanned pregnancy. By funding these nonprofit charities, the centers would be able to have the necessary resources to reach more women.

That is exactly what has happened. In fiscal year 1996, we served 6,715 women statewide with 72 centers. In fiscal year 2005, we served 16,600 women with 120 centers. With the necessary financial resources, centers opened more sites and hired more counselors and continue to serve more women in need. To date, over 123,000 women have been served under the program.

Q: Does Real Alternatives have appeal for abortion-advocates as well?

Bagatta: It ought to. Once there is a crisis pregnancy, this is the only program established to help a woman in need

choose life. By providing a counselor to be with the woman in need from the moment she finds out she is pregnant to 12 months after the birth of the baby, this program empowers the mother to overcome her obstacles and crisis. She is not alone. She knows someone is with her to help her.

An alternative to abortion is not a pamphlet, it is another person; it is one woman seeing another woman in crisis and loving her and supporting her like she is her own daughter. This program represents the best in America.

Q: Recently you began working with faith-based organizations. How does that teamwork happen, practically speaking?

Bagatta: This has been a greatly welcomed change in our ability to use experienced service providers to serve women throughout the state.

Again, due to interpretation of U.S. Supreme Court First Amendment cases, we were restricted in the type of faith-based organizations we were allowed to contract due to the program being funded with government money.

Thanks to President George Bush's Faith-Based Initiative Executive Order, all entities administering government funds are allowed to contract with faith-based organizations as long as the faith-based organization keeps their promotion of religion separate from the government-funded service.

Now, women can receive our government-funded service from a faith-based organization like Catholic Charities and also receive religious services and support.

Q: Your program recommends abstinence for young people. What is the most difficult part of educating youth in this?

Bagatta: Remember, when we see young women in our centers they have

already become sexually active.

Not all young women, however, who think they are pregnant when they come to our centers are indeed pregnant. For them, our goal is modify their risky lifestyle and behavior, not accommodate it.

We do not want them to come through our doors again. We not only want them to avoid a teen pregnancy but also a sexually transmitted disease. Abstinence is the only way to lower teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Since this is the healthiest lifestyle for teens; this is what we recommend.

Youth and parents are very ignorant or misinformed about the epidemic of sexually transmitted disease among our teenage population. In America, one out of two youths will acquire an STD before the age of 25. The only contraceptive that attempts to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is the condom and it fails.

For example, in 2001, a U.S. governmental study revealed no proof that condoms prevented transmission of gonorrhea, chlamydia infection, trichomoniasis, genital herpes, syphilis, chancroid, and HPV-associated diseases.

We have known for years that certain strains of HPV cause deadly cervical cancer. Once we found out about these studies, we told the teenage girls this information so they could avoid these diseases -- which in some cases are incurable and cause death -- through abstinence.

Teenagers are smart and want the facts.

Q: Your Web site explains that a main goal is providing information so that a client can make an educated and informed choice about her health and that of her baby. How much does a "typical" client know about abortion?

Bagatta: Many times a woman assumes that there is just this "blob of tissue" that is removed. This is why tasteful, medically accurate fetal development photos interest her and why we have them on our Web site.

In addition, counselors provide information of the types of abortion performed and the risks associated with abortion. This information is provided to ensure that women who are considering abortion are fully informed about what is occurring in an abortion and of the ramifications of that decision.

The primary purpose of the program is to provide pregnancy support services that promote childbirth instead of abortion. Women seeking alternatives to abortion appreciate as many facts as possible when they are undecided about what to do in a crisis pregnancy. Providing her with facts empowers her and ensures she is fully informed before she makes a decision.

Q: Real Alternatives continues to provide assistance to mothers and fathers even after babies are born. Why and how does this work?

Bagatta: The client arrives at the service provider and starts to receive counseling support that meets her needs.

If she is not sure she is pregnant, then a pregnancy self-test kit will be offered to her. If she is pregnant, the counselor will listen to the expressed concern she has about the pregnancy. If she is new to parenting, parenting classes or stress management counseling might be offered to ensure the crisis pregnancy does not become a crisis-parenting situation.

Each woman seeking the services comes as a unique individual. As such, her family, her education, her beliefs and her experiences shape her.

This program provides a person to assist and mentor the woman to overcome her obstacles and meet her needs from the time she finds out she is pregnant until her baby is 12 months old.

Q: Explain how other states have looked to Pennsylvania with thoughts of implementing similar programs. Could this become a nationwide program?

Bagatta: Once we established the program and abortions started to decrease in Pennsylvania, other state pro-life organizations became interested in this first-of-its-kind program. Remember, using tax dollars to promote life was revolutionary.

As a result of our educating these pro-life organization about the program, state governors and legislatures in Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Florida and Texas placed funding of Alternative to Abortion Services programs in their budgets.

Most of the states could not fund their programs at the \$5.5 million a year level of Pennsylvania and now have much smaller programs. The state of Texas, however, proposed a large \$2.5-million-a-year program and asked us to replicate our program there.

Real Alternatives, through its government audits, has earned the reputation in Pennsylvania as a fiscally responsible and trusted custodian of public funds.

This is the program that works in America lowering abortions and is certainly the compassionate and caring approach that should be tried in the rest of the world and funded as an additional program through the United Nations.