



ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE + ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON + DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

**Statement on Senate Bill 690,
“Limited Service Pregnancy Centers -- Disclaimers”**

Presented to the Senate Finance Committee

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

By

Nancy E. Paltell, Ph.D.

This statement, **in opposition to SB 690**, is conveyed on behalf of the Catholic bishops serving Maryland and their dioceses.

Senate Bill 690, if enacted, will harm women. Pregnancy support centers around the state serve more than 30,000 women each year. They partner with local health departments and social service agencies to provide free pregnancy support services to women experiencing a crisis pregnancy. Mandating that pregnancy support centers state they “are not required to provide factually accurate information” would discourage women from seeking help at these non-profit centers.

When a woman is abandoned by her husband, boyfriend, family or other support system *because of* an unplanned pregnancy, it becomes a crisis pregnancy. These women are frightened, alone and looking for someone to talk to, someone to help them through a difficult situation. They may at first feel that abortion is their only way out, their only choice. But when they see the help that is available through pregnancy resource centers, many women feel empowered to choose childbirth instead of abortion.

Evidence that pregnancy resource centers provide valuable services comes in many forms. In Maryland, it often comes in the form of the numerous referrals made by local health department and departments of social services (DSS) *to* pregnancy resource centers. If pregnancy resource centers were not legitimate, caring non-profit organizations that provide emotional, material and practical assistance to pregnant and parenting women, it’s unlikely DSS or health departments would refer clients to them.

Even though state agencies often refer clients to pregnancy resource centers, the state of Maryland does not provide any funding to pregnancy resource centers. Several states take a different approach. For example, Pennsylvania provides \$6 million per year to pregnancy resource centers. Pennsylvania’s Department of Public Welfare (DPW) has signed a contract with a non-profit organization called Real Alternatives; Real Alternatives administers the Pennsylvania Alternatives to Abortion Program. Real

Alternatives in turn sub-contracts the work of providing pregnancy support services to pregnancy resource centers, maternity homes, and adoption agencies. These sub-contractors, known as “service providers,” are under contractual obligation to provide pregnancy support services on a fee-for-service basis. The contract with the state outlines the services that are reimbursable and the agreed-upon fees. All client literature is ***guaranteed by the vendor*** to contain “the latest or most current health or medical information and statistics published as of the date of the order.” Additionally, as part of their sub-contract with the state, all service providers are audited annually.

The Pennsylvania program that provides practical, life-affirming alternatives to abortion to women experiencing a crisis pregnancy is the model for the nation. The program has won numerous awards, listed in Attachment 1, including the Seal of Excellence from the Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations. Real Alternatives received a ***perfect*** audit score on their most recent audit by Pennsylvania’s DPW. A letter of recommendation from Governor Ed Rendell’s secretary of DPW, Estelle Richman, is shown in Attachment 2.

While the standards of excellence and integrity in place at Maryland pregnancy resource centers are extraordinarily high, the standards imposed by Real Alternatives are even higher. In order to become a certified service provider in Pennsylvania and therefore be eligible to receive state and federal funding, a service provider must pass a rigorous approval process, requiring 90-180 days to complete. This service provider approval process (described in Attachment 3), coupled with the annual audits, ensures that only the highest quality services are given to Pennsylvania pregnant women in need.

When Maryland brings Real Alternatives to the state to administer a state- and federal-funded alternatives-to-abortion program, the state will automatically have oversight of the pregnancy support centers that choose to participate. Contractual obligations and annual audits will ensure all service providers receiving state and federal funds are meeting rigorous standards.

In the meantime, rather than hinder the work of these Good Samaritan nonprofit organizations that are helping pregnant women in every Maryland community, the state should reject legislation that seeks to discredit pregnancy resource centers. We urge an unfavorable report for SB 690.