

Local 'Safe haven' Law Seldom Used

State counts only a few abandoned infant cases

By Joe Gould

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New Jersey spent \$500,000 last year. Michigan spent \$200,000. Mississippi raised private money to pay for a \$150,000 advertising campaign.

Connecticut, however, spent just \$30,000 to promote awareness of its "safe haven" law, which allows reluctant mothers to drop off unwanted newborns at hospitals instead of abandoning them at roadsides or in restrooms. A chorus of critics say the state could do more.

"You know, \$30,000 goes nowhere when you're buying media," said Susan Yolen, director of public affairs and communications for Planned Parenthood of Connecticut.

But in the days after a woman abandoned a baby at a Brookfield diner, state officials defended their efforts. They said 65,000 flyers have been distributed explaining the safe haven concept, and that only four babies have been abandoned in Connecticut — two at hospitals — since the law went into effect 13 months ago.

The state Department of Children and Families believes the law is working. "If a single child is saved, the legislation has proved its worth," said Gary Kleeblatt, a DCF spokesman.

Experts say there have been no comprehensive national studies on abandoned babies. In 1998, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services attempted to get a handle on the issue, but researchers could find no authoritative statistics and ended up counting abandonment cases in local newspaper stories. "Unfortunately, nation and state data on the number of abandoned infants are practically nonexistent," wrote Nina Williams-Mbengue, a policy specialist who is tracking the issue with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that women who abandon babies are very young, but their race and income vary, Williams-Mbengue stated. "Most are in denial of their pregnancies

and appear to be unaware of or afraid to use the resources available to help them before and after their pregnancies," she stated. The lack of data also makes it difficult to determine where safe haven laws are working and why.

This much is known: the laws started in Texas in 1999. After an alarming 13 babies were abandoned in public places in the space of 10 months, legislators passed a law to encourage parents to leave unwanted newborns in a safe place. Similar laws caught on fast elsewhere. Liberal lawmakers favored them because they helped disadvantaged mothers; conservatives liked them as an alternative to abortion. Today, 35 states shield from prosecution parents who leave infants in designated places. In some states, the drop-off must take place within 72 hours of birth.

Under the Connecticut law, which took effect in October 2000, a parent has 31 days to take an infant to any hospital emergency room in the state. The hospital staff screens and evaluates the baby.

The parent gets a packet of information about their rights. They're asked for their name and address, but they don't need to answer. The hospital is required to call the state Department of Children and Families within 24 hours. DCF takes custody of the baby, but officials may return the baby to parents under certain circumstances.

"A lot of these parents are stressed to the max, and these are new parents and teens," said Dr. Tom Koobatian, director of emergency medicine at New Milford Hospital. "With some reflection or peace of mind, within 24 to 48 hours they want their child back. It's a great opportunity to refer them to DCF and have DCF support them."

But Koobatian and other advocates believe Connecticut has under-promoted the law. "The state hasn't done a fantastic job," Koobatian said. "I've talked to health care professionals and they have no idea that the law exists. A large percentage of the general public has no idea this is in existence."

Some states designated fire and police stations — as well as hospitals — as safe havens and have allocated money to train emergency workers to treat newborns. No such money was allocated in Connecticut. Yolen, of Connecticut Planned Parenthood, said lawmakers seemed concerned about the issue of training emergency workers when they decided to limit drop-offs to hospitals.

There was also no money designated specifically to publicize the law. DCF spent \$30,000 from its general budget on a media campaign, said Kleeblatt, the DCF spokesman.

The DCF distributed 65,000 pamphlets at hospitals, clinics and schools, Kleeblatt said. The agency also produced television and radio spots, and paid for them to be broadcast 1,500 times.

The pamphlets, some printed in English and others in Spanish, answers questions like, "What will happen when I bring my infant to the emergency room?" and "What will happen to my infant when I leave the hospital?"

The Department of Children and Families does not track abandoned newborns, though Kleeblatt called abandonments "a rare occurrence." Since the law passed, the DCF did record two babies dropped at hospitals and two abandoned illegally. The first use of the law was on Oct. 30, 2000. A 22-year-old woman brought her newborn girl to St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford, Kleeblatt said. Eventually, the baby was returned to its mother.

In the second case, on May 6 of this year, a baby boy was brought to St. Mary's Hospital in Waterbury, Kleeblatt said. The mother did not leave any identifying information, so the state does not know who she is. The child is now living with a family that wishes to adopt him.

The latest illegal abandonment took place on Nov. 23. An employee of the Red Colony Diner in Brookfield allegedly abandoned her baby in the diner's bathroom. Found in a trash can, the infant boy's temperature had sunk to 85 degrees. He was taken to Danbury Hospital for treatment. The child is now in DCF custody. In March, a baby wrapped in a blanket was left in the rain and near-freezing temperatures on a street just off a Greenwich exit on Interstate 95. A neighbor checking her mail found the baby and called 911; the baby was rescued.

Shocked, state Rep. Claudia Powers, R-Greenwich, made a 30-second public service announcement to publicize the safe haven law. She sent the tape to television stations statewide. But last week, Powers said she suspected that the spots ran only for a short period and have since been either "thrown out or shelved."

"They put them on when they want to put them on," Powers said of the TV stations. "I had a friend who was channel surfing and they said, 'I saw you at one o'clock in the morning.'"

Other states have had more robust efforts.

New Jersey — home of the "prom mom," a teenager who in November was released from prison after suffocating the baby she bore in 1997 in a high school bathroom during her prom — designated \$500,000 to publicize its safe haven law, passed in August 2000.

The money paid for training for police and firefighters, a toll-free hotline, and advertising in newspapers and on billboards, radio and television.

Since the New Jersey law was passed, 10 babies have been abandoned. Seven were brought to safe havens and three were not. One illegally abandoned baby died. Of the unwanted babies, one was found "near a billboard advertising the program and another was three blocks away from our building," said Joe Delmar of the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

Some states, like Mississippi, are working without taxpayer support. The Mississippi Attorney General's Office helped organize a publicity campaign using private donations and the slogan "If you can't keep your baby, we can."

The campaign used donated billboard space, donated flyers and donated posters. State alcohol and tobacco agents have been doing double duty tacking promotional posters inside barroom bathrooms. Actress Sela Ward of television's "Once and Again" donated time for a public service announcement.

"Publicity is the key," said Elizabeth Hocker, a special assistant attorney general in Mississippi. "Florida had their law for a year without a publicity campaign, and nine babies were illegally abandoned. We decided, 'That can't happen here.'"

Women's advocates agree that more can be done in Connecticut. That means billboard ads, more literature and more public service announcements on television and radio.

"If you want to change people's behavior, that's how you do it. It's called social marketing," said Yolen of Planned Parenthood. "If you want to reach people, you have to work at it constantly," Yolen said. "McDonald's doesn't just advertise in February and hope people remember. You see their commercials all the time."

Alice Pritchard, executive director of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, called DCF's publicity efforts "a good first step" and suggested the agency reach out to women through school and community programs. "The girl who (abandoned her baby) was scared. She was frightened. We have to figure out how she thinks and get through to her," Pritchard said.

Kleeblatt, of the DCF, defended the agency and said there is little evidence that states who spend more money to publicize their safe haven laws consistently see good results.

"The law can make a difference where a mom can make a rational decision," Kleeblatt said. But for women who are distraught enough to consider giving up a child, "it's pretty hard to use information to affect a rational decision. They're not making rational decisions."

Yet in the wake of the recent Brookfield abandonment case, the state plans to distribute more pamphlets and step up promotion of the safe haven law. "We are going to renew our call to the media to show these ads," Kleeblatt said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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