

# TOWN SQUARE

A PLACE TO BE HEARD

## YOUR VIEW

# Moms oppose buffer zone around Planned Parenthood



**Cindy O'Brien**



Katherine Mercado's baby girl, Giuliana, is almost 3 months old now. She smiles and is way too cute in a photo that her mom sent me. As Mercado talks to me on the phone, I can hear Giuliana sweetly gurgling in the background.

How I wish we were talking about the latest fashions in baby clothes. But no, we're talking about four pro-abortion ordinances the Allentown City Council seems intent on passing. The most controversial of the four is an ordinance that would create a 15-foot buffer zone around clinics and hospitals. The measure is aimed at making it more difficult for pro-life advocates and sidewalk counselors to interact with pregnant women outside Planned Parenthood on Ninth Street in Allentown.

Allentown resident Mercado says the proposed ordinance is a bad idea. She should know because, last September, pro-life sidewalk counselors helped her walk away from Planned Parenthood and save the life of her unborn baby. "I think that women going to Planned Parenthood should have the opportunity to speak to sidewalk counselors," Mercado said. "They are like angels. They never leave you."

Mercado credits sidewalk counselor Dr. Maria Tatiana Martinez-Baladejo with helping her throughout her pregnancy and her baby's birth. "Fatiana was with me through labor and delivery," Mercado said. "She stayed with me from the time I went into labor until after my baby was born."

Following Giuliana's birth, pro-life advocates organized material and financial assistance for Mercado, who is married and has three other children. "They are still helping me with everything," Mercado said. "I don't have to buy clothes or diapers for my baby. They have done everything for me so that I can raise my baby."

Sharinet Rosario is another Allentown mom who disagrees with the proposed ordinance. Rosario, 21, was only 15 when she got pregnant with her son. "A

15-foot buffer zone would have a negative impact on expectant mothers," said Rosario, who emphasized the importance of expectant mothers being able to easily talk to pro-life sidewalk counselors.

"On my way to Planned Parenthood, I was really scared and confused about what I was going to do," said Rosario. "But then I met Maggie Sweet, a pro-life sidewalk counselor, who was very reassuring and helped me see my situation in a positive light. Maggie helped me get a free pregnancy test and ultrasound at Bright Hope pregnancy resource center."

Rosario is now married to her son's father, has a second child, and expects to graduate from college in December.

Sweet has served as a volunteer pro-life sidewalk counselor for 20 years outside Planned Parent-

hood in Allentown. Fluent in Spanish, Sweet estimates that she has helped save at least 30 babies from abortion.

Despite their good works, pro-life advocates are frequently described in derisive terms. Abortion supporters refer to them as picketers and protesters and accuse them of harassing and bullying pregnant clients at Planned Parenthood. But is there any truth to these accusations?

To find out, I emailed Allentown Police Capt. Kyle Pammer. I asked him if there have been any charges filed against pro-life advocates at Planned Parenthood in Allentown over the last five to 10 years. He replied, "At this time, I'm not aware of any incidents where someone has been charged."

Next I called Jeremy Samek, senior counsel at the Independence Law Center, a constitu-

tional and civil rights law firm based in Harrisburg. Samek said the proposed 15-foot buffer zone is unnecessary because it is already illegal for people to block doors. Free speech and First Amendment rights are the real issue. According to Samek, free speech between people having one-on-one conversations outside abortion clinics is a protected right under the First Amendment. "Even if there was someone who did something illegal, that doesn't justify taking away someone else's First Amendment rights," Samek said.

In the absence of illegal activity, the proposed 15-foot buffer zone ordinance may be viewed as an attempt by the Allentown City Council to stifle any speech that doesn't encourage abortion. "These types of ordinances have been tried in other cities," Samek said. "Their aim is to prevent

expectant mothers from learning about alternatives to abortion and from accessing the resources that they need to parent an unborn baby."

Samek lamented the lack of government action to protect pro-life pregnancy resource centers, which have been attacked and vandalized numerous times in other cities due to controversy surrounding the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. "City councils are not protecting the ability of mothers and other visitors to safely enter pregnancy resource centers," Samek said.

This is a real problem that the Allentown City Council could address if it were sincerely committed to helping pregnant women.

*Cindy O'Brien, who lives in Bethlehem Township, is a former newspaper reporter.*

## Where to write

**Mail letters to**  
The Morning Call  
Box 1260  
Allentown, Pa. 18105

**Email letters**  
letters@mcall.com

**Guest columns**  
townsquare@mcall.com

**Letters are edited** for length, clarity and taste and must include your name, address and telephone number. Letters should not exceed 200 words.

**Guest columns** should be on timely topics and no more than 700 words. Direct questions to Mike Hirsch, 610-820-6562. mike.hirsch@mcall.com

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**YOUR VIEW**

# We can do more to help the pregnant and homeless

**N**ot all women in crisis pregnancies cross state lines to get abortions. Some women do it to save their babies.

Destiny Figueroa was 21 years old and living in Newark last year when she found out that she was 15 weeks pregnant. Not really sure what to do, Figueroa decided to leave Newark and look for a safe haven in Pennsylvania.

"I'm from Newark and I know how Newark is," Figueroa said. "So, I decided to move because I wanted a better life for myself and my baby."



**Cindy O'Brien**

Figueroa stayed for a while with a cousin in Breinigsville before finding a Bright Hope Pregnancy Support Center in Allentown. Bright Hope offers transitional housing to pregnant women at risk for homelessness. Established in 1981, Bright Hope is a nonprofit charitable organization that serves about 1,000 pregnant women a year.

Bright Hope's Allentown center is located at 1034 Hamilton St. There are also centers at 541 E. Broad St., Bethlehem; and 2204 Northampton St., Easton. All three centers offer free and confidential pregnancy tests and ultrasounds that are administered by registered nurses, counseling, and referrals to government assistance programs.

Bright Hope's maternity facility for pregnant women, Door of Hope, can house up to eight pregnant women who can reside there until their babies are a year old. Bright Hope provides ongoing care and resources to new moms through their babies' third birthday.

Figueroa moved into her Door of Hope apartment last February. "Everyone there welcomed me with open arms," she said.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

After finding out that she was pregnant, Destiny Figueroa moved to Pennsylvania to find a safe haven for herself and her baby, Alishia, who was born on June 23.

In June, Figueroa moved out of Door of Hope to live with an aunt in South Jersey. Two weeks later, Figueroa's baby daughter, Alishia, was born. I had the pleasure of meeting them both at Bright Hope's annual Gala of Hope dinner on Sept. 19.

While Figueroa's story has a happy outcome, some pregnant women at risk for homelessness are not so fortunate.

"I get requests from all across the country for maternity housing for

pregnant women facing homelessness," said Jon Merwarth, Bright Hope executive director. "I work with other maternity housing [facilities] in the area, but there's just not enough housing to meet the needs of women facing homelessness."

A homeless pregnant woman who can't get housing in a pregnancy support center may end up living in homeless shelters until she goes into labor and delivers her baby in a hospital,

Merwarth explained.

"This past year we helped a young woman who was living in a car with a 2-week-old baby," Merwarth said. "She became a resident in our transitional maternity housing program."

Recently an anonymous donor pledged \$250,000 to Bright Hope to start a building fund for a new maternity housing facility. Merwarth said he is looking to find matching funds to build new housing for up to 25 home-

less pregnant women.

"Last year we saved 129 babies," Merwarth said. "I bet we could double or triple that if people knew we existed and knew that there was a place to go."

In addition to Bright Hope, there are other organizations in the Lehigh Valley that help women with unplanned pregnancies: Cay Galgon Life House at 714 W. Broad St., Bethlehem; Pennsylvanians for Human Life; Lehigh Valley Pro-Life Future; Silent No More; 40 Days for Life; and church groups.

Pro-life community members try to provide ongoing support for women in crisis pregnancies. I have attended two pro-life baby showers for several pregnant women who had walked away from local abortion clinics. The showers provided these expectant mothers with diapers, baby clothes, changing tables, cribs, strollers, car seats and more. I cannot begin to tell you about the outpouring of love and generosity that I saw from the pro-life community for those brave young women.

Regardless of how much help a woman in a crisis pregnancy receives, she must ultimately learn to provide for herself, her baby and any other children she may have.

"The whole process of living in our maternity home is designed to help women achieve long-term sustainability and self-sufficiency," said Merwarth. "We provide guidance, give referrals, and help with job searches and resume writing."

As a new mother, Figueroa wants to provide for her baby. She plans to be a nursing assistant and will start school in November.

"I love Alishia," Figueroa said. "She's the best thing that has happened to me."

Looking back on her unplanned pregnancy, Figueroa has some advice for women facing the same situation: "Be positive about being pregnant. The baby is a life."

*Cindy O'Brien, who lives in Bethlehem Township, is a former newspaper reporter.*