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**Both sides of abortion debate back `safe havens' for babies**

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From Opposing Viewpoints In Context.

ANNAPOLIS - Pro-life and pro-choice groups yesterday banded together to ask state lawmakers to support legislation that would create "safe havens" at hospitals, where parents could leave days-old babies without fear of prosecution.

Supporting the legislation are Maryland Right to Life and Marylanders for the Right to Choose - a coalition that includes state chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, Planned Parenthood and some faith groups.

Advocates yesterday alluded to Tanisha Montague, a Jamaican teen-ager convicted last year of attempted murder for placing her newborn in a trash bin at a Germantown apartment complex during a January 2000 snowstorm.

"Luckily the child was found within 15 minutes of [trash] trucks coming," said Delegate Joan Pitkin, a Prince George's County Democrat who is sponsoring one of six "safe haven" bills.

Virtually all of the bills would guarantee anonymity to parents or guardians who leave babies at designated havens, as well as immunity from civil or criminal prosecution for those relinquishing and accepting children.

But lawmakers, including House Judiciary Committee Chairman Joseph F. Vallario Jr., expressed concerns that provisions terminating parental rights in 30 to 60 days could unfairly affect fathers and other relatives unaware of the child's birth or that it had been given up.

The bills mostly are silent on how relatives might be informed, although one would allow published notice.

"Is the father named?," asked Mr. Vallario, Prince George's County Democrat. "If the mother was named, we'd have a chance to see who."

Delegate Anthony J. O'Donnell, a Republican representing Calvert and St. Mary's counties, said he has received letters complaining that the bills would "legalize and advocate" abandonedbabies.

Delegate Sharon Grosfeld, a Montgomery County Democrat who is a family law attorney and bill sponsor, said court and social services procedures already exist and would be used to find the unknown parent.

"All the bills have the same intent and will get to the same place - concern about the health of mother, child and rights of parents," said Patricia Kelly of the Maryland Catholic Conference. "But we won't be there if we don't first save the baby."

Hospitals would be safe havens under all the proposals; fire and police stations and crisis pregnancy centers would be under some.

Police and firefighters' groups asked that their stations not be designated as havens. While the Maryland Hospital Association supports hospitals as havens, it wants immunity for hospitals and assurance that children will be quickly transferred to the care of state agencies.

The Green Ribbon Campaign for Open Adoption Records objects to the bills because they do not ensure that a child can know his history. Also, the American Adoption Congress argues that anonymity provisions leave troubled mothers without help they need personally.

More than a dozen states have enacted such laws since 1999. Another 20 states are considering them. Only Texas enacted such a law before last year, and since most states have less than a year's experience with it, there is little data about the effectiveness of the effort or various provisions.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported 105 infants abandoned in public places in 1998; 33 were found dead.

Recent reports indicate at least 161 babies were abandoned over the past two years and that 103 of them were found dead.