**Works Cited**

"Miles" Ventimiglia, Jack. "Safe Haven laws meant to protect newborns." Daily Star-Journal, The (Warrensburg, MO) 26 Mar. 2014: Points of View Reference Center, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pwh&AN=2W61629792977&site=pov-live. Accessed 2 Nov. 2016

**Safe Haven laws meant to protect newborns**

~~~~~~~~

Jack "Miles" Ventimiglia

March 26--WARRENSBURG -- Teen-to-teen communication works best to tell young mothers they can give up newborns without hassles, Mike Morrisey of Baby Safe Haven New England said Tuesday.

Middle-aged or elderly people cannot deliver the message as well, he said.

"It's AARP talking to MTV, 'Lawrence Welk' versus 'American Idol,' and that's a huge communication gap," Morrisey said.

**THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE**

People who push Safe Haven laws across the county generally are in their 40s to 60s, he said. Their work is commendable, but after laws pass some of those leaders continue to speak for the issue instead of realizing the message coming from teens may be more meaningful to teens. Baby Safe Haven New England, after Safe Haven laws passed in the region, found young people deliver the message well, Morrisey said.

"We immediately started looking toward young people to give the message from peers to peers and once we saw that starting to work, we never went back," he said. "We've gone seven years without a deadly abandonment in New England. We used to have one to three abandonments per year on average, and half of them were deadly. So we've almost completely reversed it."

Spokespeople for the group range in age from 16 to 21, Morrisey said.

"We're bringing in more young people. We'll have within a couple of months three more young spokespeople going on to Top 40 radio stations in different places in the region," he said, adding, "In New England we've learned that it's high school freshmen and sophomores ... where most of the abandonments take place, or they're most of the people using the Safe Haven Law."

At Mother and Child Health Coalition, which supports Safe Haven in Kansas City, communications coordinator Anne Biswell said Park Hill High School students in her area participated in a YouTube about Safe Haven. She said she is open to getting high schoolers onto radio programs to talk with peers about ending baby abandonment.

"That's a great idea -- to get younger people," she said, adding, "I like the idea of getting younger people to get on the radio."

Biswell said little is being done to spread news about the revised state law.

"There is still no education effort or public awareness campaign in Missouri except for K.C. ... There is a critical need for a statewide effort to publicize this life-saving law," she said, adding, "This lack of information about the state Safe Haven law as an important missing piece to the Safe Haven puzzle."

**A LONG HISTORY**

Baby abandonment is not new, Morrisey said.

"If you look at the history, even if you go back thousands of years, there's almost always been baby abandonments," he said. "In some cultures they have river banks that they used to leave babies on for whatever reason."

What is new within the last 10 to 15 years are laws that let young people know they can give up newborns without being judged, reducing baby abandonments and deaths, Morrisey said.

"Best practice is to stop as many as you can by giving the woman a chance to separate the woman from the newborn in a safe way," he said. "It's a good outcome rather than what happened in Missouri."

Morrisey referred to Baby Boy Wilson, a less than 2-month-old baby found dead in a cave at the University of Central Missouri's Pertle Springs recreation area. Following the abandonment between Jan. 1 and March 4, the mother, Latasha M. Wilson, 19, Warrensburg, admitted she delivered the baby.

"Sometime after the delivery, Wilson discovered that the baby was deceased," based on the police version of the story filed in court March 7.

Court documents state further that Zackary Randall Carter, 20, Warrensburg, took the baby to a cave at Pertle Springs.

"Carter later returned to the cave and burned the body of Baby Boy Wilson to destroy evidence," the "probable cause" documents states.

The state charged Wilson with abandoning a corpse and Carter with tampering with evidence. The state has not announced whether further charges will be pursued.

Community members held a memorial service for Baby Boy Wilson and left stuffed animals outside the cave Thursday.

**MISSOURI LAW**

Some women go into denial about becoming mothers, Morrisey said.

"They're denying literally that they're pregnant. That's where they get into these situations where they wait until they're almost delivering ... or they're delivering and they can't deny it anymore," he said. "We want them to know that there are Safe Haven laws."

Missouri's updated Safe Haven law went into effect in August. The new law provides anonymity to parents, who have up to 45 days to surrender a baby. Babies can be left with an on-duty employee at any hospital; at fire, ambulance or police stations; and at maternity homes and pregnancy resource centers.

Biswell said surrender time, increasing from the original five days to 45, is a help.

"We wanted to give women a little bit more time to make that decision," she said. "The purpose of the law is to prevent child abuse, and to enable someone who's in a desperate situation to have an alternative to abandonment, to hurting the child, and to murder."

Recent mothers may remain conflicted about what to do after just five days, Biswell said.

"If it's the sixth day or whatever, then they might say, 'Well, I've lost my opportunity to go to a safe haven, so I just have to get rid of it.' We don't want somebody to be in that situation," she said.

Whether the new law is making a difference may be difficult to measure in Missouri, Biswell said. Mother and Child Health Coalition gets quarterly reports from the Missouri Department of Social Services -- with the last one, Dec. 31 -- showed 41 babies have been relinquished since 2009. Of the number, three came from Johnson County -- fourth most in Missouri, she said.

"The age of the baby is not shown, nor are any details about where or when the event happened," Biswell said. "This is of course due to the confidentiality requirement of the law."

Safe Haven laws work, Morrisey said, to give mothers a choice.

"We want to make sure everybody knows all the options and they can make the right plan and choice for them," he said.

\_\_\_ (c)2014 The Daily Star-Journal (Warrensburg, Mo.) Visit The Daily Star-Journal (Warrensburg, Mo.) at www.dailystarjournal.com Distributed by MCT Information Services