



Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth

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Written Testimony of Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth

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Re: SB 654 (Hospital-based Safe Haven Bill for Abandoned Babies)

Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY) is the leading child advocacy organization for the Southeastern Pennsylvania region. We would like to comment upon the proposed Hospital-based Safe Haven Bill for Abandoned Babies, SB 654. PCCY has advocated for children and families for many years in the Commonwealth, and we oppose SB 654 because it does not provide for counseling to address the plight of young parents who may be overwhelmed by the birth of an unplanned child; does not require the gathering of the infant's medical information; and confuses the already tangled issue of the legal custody of an abandoned child.

Initially, we would like to clarify that we are supportive of the concept of attempting to save the lives of these children. We simply believe there must be a better way than SB 654. One must remember, prosecutors already have the discretion to not press charges in cases where a young mother leaves her baby in a safe environment. Furthermore, 35 states have enacted similar legislation, and these efforts have not been shown to have a significant impact upon child abandonment.

There are four main points we would like to raise regarding the difficulties of proposed SB 654.

First, the Bill serves to give overwhelmed parents a "way out" but does not in any way address the causes of infant abandonment or the needs of parents in crisis. Experts on infant abandonment believe that it is unrealistic to expect a young mother, often traumatized by a secret delivery and more afraid of her parent's response than criminal prosecution, to seek out a safe haven. These young parents need counseling to help them find safe, healthy and legal alternatives to abandonment. In addition, providing medical treatment and counseling to the parent in crisis should be considered as a means of avoiding future dilemmas.

Second, in order to make such a law effective, people will need to know about it. We believe that funding that will be required to publicize the existence of safe havens could be more beneficially directed toward education, outreach, and resources that would provide support for scared young parents and prevent crisis pregnancies. In order to truly help both infants who face abandonment and their typically overwhelmed, fearful and isolated parents, often young, single teenage girls, we must provide resources to assist and support these young women.

Third, the person who brings an infant to a safe haven is merely "encouraged" to share medical or background information about the infant. The lack of an information-gathering element to the

proposed safe haven bill does not effectively balance the well-being of the child with the needs of the parent. We must consider the long-term effects on children of being abandoned by their parent (or parents) without medical information. Such lack of information really poses, over the long term, a health risk for these babies not to know anything about their health history and not be able to have any contact with their biological families, even for informational purposes. Additionally, these children will have no way of knowing about their heritage.

Fourth, should a person other than the child's biological parents obtain an identification bracelet as allowed by SB 654, this person may have standing in future proceedings concerning the child. This is inconsistent with Pennsylvania law relating to custody, protective services and adoption. In addition, whether persons other than the infant's biological parents utilize the protection of SB 654 or not, the adoption of an anonymous abandoned baby will be fraught with risk. Adoptive families coming forward to create a home for an abandoned infant will chance the possible emergence of surprise family members seeking custody.

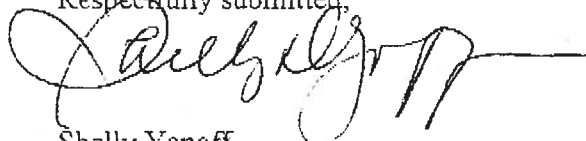
To summarize, while such legislation is undoubtedly well intended, there are some very basic problems. Young parents in dire circumstances will receive no counseling to help them deal with a complex, life altering decision. Babies will be left with no medical or social information, which is not in their best interests. And, without requiring a mother to identify herself, anyone could drop off a baby, creating problematic repercussions for determining the legal custody of the child.

Finally, you must ask yourselves, do we as a State want to send a message that discarding children with no questions asked is acceptable? Hard question needs to be asked before this seemingly helpful idea goes too far. By making such "drop offs" safe and easy will the state actually save lives, or will it encourage the abandonment of babies without providing young parents the opportunity to get counseling and support in making a choice with life-long repercussions?

PCCY encourages you to take a larger and longer view, and not resort to what may appear on the surface to be a logical quick fix.

For these reasons, PCCY opposes SB 654.

Respectfully submitted,



Shelly Yanoff
Executive Director
Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth