

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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All fifty states in the U.S. have safe haven laws. They give new, usually terrified parents the opportunity to give up their babies safely. Recently, though, something quite unexpected has been happening in Nebraska. People have been abandoning their older children, some of whom are even teenagers.

In 1999 Texas became the first state to pass a safe haven law. Lawmakers there were responding to 13 cases in which someone had abandoned an infant. They had been in garbage cans, under a bridge and outside a hotel lobby. Three of them died. As a way of protecting infants, Texas created a way for a desperate parent to abandon a baby without committing a crime.

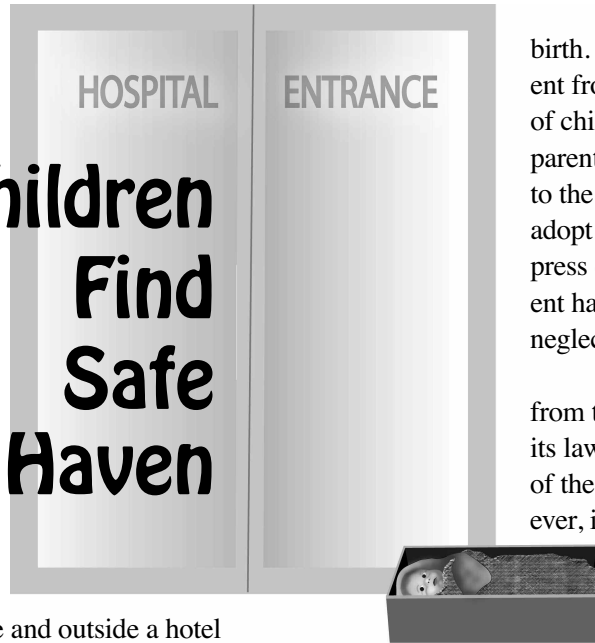
Statistics from 1998 showed that the problem existed all around the U.S. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services used newspaper reports to find that parents had abandoned 105 newborns that year. Of those infants, 33 of them had died before anyone found them. Experts say that the number of unreported cases in any year easily could be ten times higher.

The women, and sometimes men, who abandon a baby have some things in common. Usually they are young and unmarried, either in their teens or 20s. They also tend to be first-time parents. Women keep the pregnancy a secret because they fear the reaction of the baby's father or of their families. They feel so desperate that they kill the baby or leave it in a Dumpster or remote area. In the best cases they leave it where someone might find the baby quickly.

Now every state has passed a safe haven law. The intention is to save infants' lives by allowing parents to hand the baby to an employee at safe places. Those include hospitals, child-protection agencies, fire and police stations. Some states require the parent to drop the baby off within 72 hours of birth. Many others allow it up to one month, and only a few extend the period to a full year. So far these laws have saved the lives of about 2,000 babies.

The laws give the parent certain protections. They guarantee secrecy so that nobody learns about the

Children Find Safe Haven



birth. They also protect the parent from normal criminal charges of child abandonment. However, parents lose their parental rights to the baby, so another family can adopt it. In addition, states will press criminal charges if the parent has mistreated, abused or neglected the child.

Nebraska's law is different from the others. When it passed its law in July, it became the last of the 50 states to do so. However, it is the only state that does not define what "child" means. As it stands now, it means anyone under age 19.

The lack of clarity has led to unexpected results. Parents and guardians have abandoned 24 children, mostly teens and preteens. None was an infant. Lawmakers had intended to protect newborns and helpless young children from harm. Instead they got frustrated parents and guardians abandoning children who were out of control or violent.

Nebraska has seen some unusual cases. Three people have driven from other states to abandon their children in Nebraska. The state has sent them back to authorities in those states. In another case, a widowed, unemployed father of ten abandoned nine of his children ages 1-17. He said that he wanted them to be in a safe place before they all became homeless.

Nebraska's cases have put a focus on the problems that some families have. The current economic crisis in the U.S. is causing more stress. Parents are losing their jobs and families are losing their homes. Governments now are spending less money on social services for troubled families. That includes information for desperate young mothers about reproductive health, adoption and safe haven laws.

Lawmakers in Nebraska will meet in November to set a low age limit under the safe haven law. However, countless other families need help. Health officials recommend that parents reach out to services like 2-1-1 hotlines before they abandon their children. They want to help troubled families stay together so that children get the guidance, love and support they need.

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All fifty states in the U.S. have safe haven laws. They give new, usually terrified parents the opportunity to give up their babies safely. Recently, though, people in Nebraska have been abandoning their older children, even teenagers.

In 1999 Texas passed the first safe haven law. The year before that people had abandoned 13 infants, and three of them had died. As a way of protecting infants, Texas created a lawful way for a desperate parent to abandon a baby.

Statistics from 1998 showed a problem all around the U.S. There were reports of 105 abandoned newborns that year. Of those infants, 33 of them had died before anyone found them. The number of unreported cases in any year easily could be ten times higher.

The women, and sometimes men, who abandon a baby have some things in common. Usually they are unmarried, first-time parents in their teens or 20s. Women keep the pregnancy a secret because they fear the reaction of the baby's father or of their families. They feel so desperate that they kill the baby or leave it somewhere to die. Sometimes they leave it where someone might find the baby quickly.

Now every state has a safe haven law. It saves lives by allowing parents to hand the baby to an employee at safe places. Those include hospitals and fire stations. Some states require the parent to drop the baby off within 72 hours of birth. Many others allow it up to one month, and only a few allow a full year. These laws have saved about 2,000 babies.

The laws give parents protections. They guarantee secrecy, and they protect them from criminal charges of child abandonment. However,

Children Find Safe Haven

HOSPITAL

ENTRANCE



parents lose their rights to the baby, so another family can adopt it. Also, if the parent has mistreated the child, it is still a crime.

Nebraska's law is different from the others. In July it became the last of the 50 states to offer safe haven. However, it is the only state that does not define "child." For now it means anyone under age 19.

The law has brought unexpected results. Parents and

guardians have abandoned 24 children, mostly teens and preteens. None was an infant. Lawmakers had wanted to protect helpless young children. Instead they got frustrated parents and guardians abandoning children who were out of control.

Nebraska has seen some unusual cases. Three people have driven from other states to abandon their children there. In another case, a widowed, unemployed father of ten abandoned nine of his children ages 1-17. He said that he wanted them to be in a safe place before they all became homeless.

Nebraska's cases have put a focus on the problems that some families have. The economic problems in the U.S. are causing parents to lose their jobs and homes. Governments now are spending less money on social services for troubled families. That includes information for desperate young mothers about reproductive health, adoption and safe haven laws.

Lawmakers in Nebraska will meet in November to set a low age limit. However, many other families need help. Health officials recommend that parents use services like 2-1-1 hotlines before they abandon their children. They want to help troubled families stay together so that children get the guidance, love and support they need.

Background Information

Before safe haven laws, parents who abandoned babies faced charges of child endangerment, abuse, manslaughter or attempted murder.

Nebraska's courts and child welfare workers will decide what happens to the children. They may require parents and guardians to participate in parenting classes, family therapy or other services in an effort to reunify the families. Courts also may require parents to pay child support to the state.

A mother from Georgia traveled nearly 1,000 miles to abandon her 12-year-old son at a hospital in Nebraska.

Public health officials dislike that secret pregnancies result in poor health care for the mothers. Under normal circumstances mothers visit a doctor regularly and learn strategies that protect their own health as well as the baby's during pregnancy.

Some parents in troubled families hesitate to get help. Many parents would like help, but they cannot afford it. The health insurance of many middle-income parents does not pay for psychiatric services and treatment programs. Families on Medicaid have trouble finding therapists who will accept the low rates of payment.

Several of the Nebraska families already had had contact with social workers and psychologists. However, the children remained violent and unmanageable, and the parents felt that their situations were not improving.

About half of the abandoned children in Nebraska are former wards of the state. The parents had been unable to care for the children, so they were adopted by, or placed under the guardianship of, relatives. The relatives said that they had abandoned the children because they simply could not deal with them any longer.

In the seven years since South Dakota enacted a safe haven law, people have legally abandoned three children. In eight years New Jersey has had 37 safe surrenders of infants up to two months old.

The District of Columbia does not have a safe haven law.

Safe haven also exists for children up to age 18 who have been sexually assaulted. They can find safe haven at more than 600 centers around the U.S.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Why do you think some young parents abandon their newborn babies?

Comprehension:

- Explain what safe haven laws do, and describe how Nebraska's law is different.

Beyond the Text:

- Make an argument for an age limit that you think would be appropriate.
- How bad do you think things have to be for a parent to abandon a preteen or teenaged child?
- Why do you think that so few desperate young mothers use safe haven laws?

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: haven; desperate; crime; pregnancy; Dumpster*; criminal charges; to neglect*; hotline

High-use: : to abandon; to respond*; statistic; reaction; intention*; to extend*; to guarantee; clarity*; authorities*; economic; crisis*; reproductive

Sources

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www.nationalsafehavenalliance.org

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

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