



Babies Thrown in Garbage Cans - Help for Desperate Parents

By **Mary L. Pulido** 02/24/2018

“Newborn baby found dead in garbage can in Queens.” This tragedy was easily overlooked in the Sunday edition of the New York Daily News. A blip on the screen, another baby tossed away. Another John or Jane Doe. Children are dying in record numbers from child abuse and neglect! A federal report shows that the rates of child abuse are climbing again. In 2015, the number of estimated child fatalities because of abuse or neglect — 1,670 — was the highest in five years. Stated another way, in the U.S., every five and a half hours, an infant or toddler dies from child abuse — at the hands of the parent or caretaker who should be protecting them. This sounds like a horror movie script — but it is real life. For those of us who dedicate our lives to protecting children, it makes you question whether or not we are doing enough to reach parents who are at the end of their rope.

Obviously, we are not.

There are a few resources that could help desperate parents: Safe Havens, Crisis Nurseries and Parent Crisis Helplines.

Every state in the United States, has a law that allows an unharmed child to be relinquished to the proper authorities, no questions asked. It’s called the “Infant Safe Haven Law” It was developed as an incentive for mothers in crisis to safely give up their child to designated locations where the babies are protected. The laws generally allow the parent to remain anonymous and to be shielded from prosecution for abandonment or neglect in exchange for bringing the baby to a safe haven. You can access the laws for each state through the Child Welfare Information Gateway. The locations that are designated Safe Havens vary by state, but they include: fire stations, police stations, hospitals, emergency medical provider by responding to a 911 call or a church. These providers then contact child protective services to let them know the infant has been relinquished.

The window of opportunity that a distressed parent has to give up their baby varies tremendously. The National Safe Haven Alliance has a map on its website that give you the number of days that a parent has to give up the infant for each state. They range from three days (California, Oregon, Michigan) to one year (North Dakota and Missouri.) The average is 30 days, as is the case for New York State. This website also tells you the providers that can accept infants into their care.

Crisis Nurseries are another option for parents at their wits end, or, are in an emergency situation whereby they can’t care for their child(ren). These programs were developed to prevent child abuse and neglect. Most offer free 24/7 crisis nursery care for children up to age 12, when parents who are over-stressed, need a break, or have an emergency arise. Usually, you can leave a child for up to 72 hours at a time. The services vary, but at most programs, the children can receive medical services, developmental screening and assessment, age appropriate recreational play, education, including transportation to local schools and crisis counseling for parents. The staff at these programs work with the parent(s) to develop a safety plan for the children’s return to home.

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A partial list of crisis nurseries can be found at this link. From the research I could find, it appears that 47 states have a total of 175 programs that are funded through federal funding. The best way to identify programs in your area is imply to google “crisis nursery” along with the name of your state. There is one in New York City run by the NY Foundling.

Parent Crisis Helplines can help too. First, they can put the parent in touch with one of the crisis nurseries or explain the Safe Haven law, if it applies. They can also provide a supportive outlet for a stressed out parent to discuss the difficulties that they are having in parenting their children. The counselors range from trained volunteers to paid professional staff. Many operate 24 hours a day and offer services in several languages too. The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress offers a nationwide crisis hotline list for each state. These hotlines offer counseling services for issues such as parental crisis, suicide prevention or domestic violence.

In New York, I regularly refer parents to the Prevent Child Abuse New York’s Parent Helpline at 1–800-Children, a confidential helpline where parents can get information and referrals to places in their community that can help.

So, we will never know if these services would have helped the parents and this newborn baby — but they could help others. Part of the problem is that parents who need these services, don’t know about them. There is simply no funding available to advertise Safe Haven or Crisis Nursery availability.

Please forward this information to parents you know. You may be helping a desperate parent do the right thing when they are under too much stress. You may also be saving a child’s life.

For more information on keeping your child safe visit nysppcc.org.

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