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'Father of Safe Haven' laws urges increased awareness

'Father' of state's law calls for increased awareness

By Dirk Perrefort
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DANBURY -- A decade has passed now since the day life changed dramatically for Tim Jaccard, a medical officer with the Nassau County Police Department.

Jaccard was trying to get out of work early to comfort a family member who had just had a miscarriage when a call came over the scanner of an unresponsive baby at a courthouse.

When he arrived at the scene, he was horrified to find a 6-pound, 4-ounce baby in the bathroom -- lifeless.

The baby had been drowned in a toilet bowl, less than a stone's throw from the courthouse lobby where more than 400 people mulled about, he said.

That incident and several more like it led Jaccard on a mission to enact Safe Haven laws -- laws that allow a mother to anonymously drop off a child at safe havens with no repercussions or threats of prosecution.

It's an issue that hit home for Danbury residents when city resident Panna Krom, 18, drowned her baby in a toilet after delivering it in a bathroom in her Fifth Avenue home in December 2006, when she was 16.

Krom, who has said that she was not aware of the Safe Haven program, was sentenced last week to 18 years in prison after pleading guilty to a manslaughter charge.

Jaccard's efforts were what resulted in Safe Haven laws being enacted in all 50 states.

Jaccard, who is known as the "Father of Safe Haven," said that while many lives have been saved, much more can be done.

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He met this week in Cromwell with representatives of several

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nonprofit organizations, including pregnancy centers and maternity homes in an effort to create more awareness of the law.

"Connecticut has a great law," said Jaccard, the founder and president of AMT Children of Hope Foundation in New York. AMT stands for ambulance medical technician, which Jaccard is trained as.

"We receive a lot of calls to our crisis hotline from the state," he related. "The problem is there is no Safe Haven infrastructure in the state, there is no promotion of the law."

Jaccard is hoping to team up with the Connecticut Catholic Conference to create a nonprofit organization in the state geared toward providing the infrastructure and support needed to create more awareness of the Safe Haven law.

"We hope to have it up and running by February," he said.

Jaccard added that his organization has also spent more than \$150,000 to create a public service announcement that he is offering free of charge to Connecticut.

"They just need an outlet to air them," he explained.

State Rep. Robert Godfrey, D-Danbury, said there is more to be done.

"One of the things that bugs me is advertising done by state agencies that have nothing to do with providing services to the public," Godfrey said. "The lottery seems to get more advertising dollars than programs like Safe Haven that save lives."

Godfrey said that while it's going to be a difficult budget year on the state level, he plans to address the issue with legislative leaders.

Jaccard said his organization is offering metal signs that help promote the Safe Haven law to municipalities throughout the state. The black and white signs, which depict a baby cradled in a hand, can be placed below the large blue "H" signs seen throughout Connecticut that point residents to the nearest hospital.

Danbury Mayor Mark Boughton said he would be interested in talking to Jaccard about getting some of the signs.

"I know that students are informed through the school system about the Safe Haven law, but we have to keep reminding people that there are options available to them," Boughton said. "Anything we can do to let people know this law exists would be appreciated."

Jaccard noted that some politicians at the state level were

concerned about costs when the law was enacted eight years ago. But he argues that the costs of not making people aware of Safe Haven far outweigh the expense of promoting the program.

For example, he pointed out, the state will have to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to incarcerate Krom.

"Sometimes these young women find themselves in a desperate situation and they need to know they have alternatives," said Elizabeth Rex, president of The Children First Foundation, a tri-state organization that works toward increasing the number of crisis pregnancy adoptions by raising public awareness.

The foundation organized the conference in Cromwell that Jaccard addressed on Thursday.

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AMT Children of Hope Foundation crisis hotline 1-877-796-HOPE (4673) Hotline provides information to new or expecting mothers about Safe Haven laws and other support services available.

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