Commentary: How some abortion opponents get ‘pro-life’ radically right

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In this time of social and political polarization, we should remind ourselves of something that unites us—abortion.

 Marcia PallyAbortion is divisive when the focus is on legislative battles and court cases, like this summer’s Supreme Court decision striking down a Texas law regulating abortion clinics.

But field research and interviews around the country show reducing abortion as much as possible is a universal goal with broad consensus about how to achieve it.

In 1981, Betty Friedan wrote The Second Stage. She concluded the second stage of feminism should focus on how economic, health and day care systems can support families better.

What might be called the second stage of the abortion opposition movement may be coming to similar conclusions.

The poverty factor

Roughly 75 percent of abortions in America occur when families can't afford a child, according to the Guttmacher Institute. Sixty-nine percent of women who seek abortions are "economically disadvantaged."

Between 2000 and 2008, the abortion rate decreased 28 percent among higher-income women and rose 18 percent among poorer females. Today, women with family incomes below the federal poverty level—$18,530 for a family of three—account for more than 40 percent of all abortions.

Recognition of the link between financial need and abortion was broad-based in research I conducted nationwide from 2009 to 2016. As Greg Boyd, an evangelical pastor in St. Paul, Minn., explained: "A person could vote for a candidate who is not 'pro-life' but who will help the economy and the poor. Yet this may be the best way to curb the abortion rate."

Boyd reflects a growing consensus that addressing abortion is not a partisan position. "I am decidedly pro-life," the evangelical pastor Joel Hunter said. "But by working together instead of arguing, both sides can get what they want."

"… build the village"

Also making the nonpartisan point, Susan Gallucci, a licensed social worker who runs a residence maternity home in Washington, D.C., is opposed to abortion. But she uses Hillary Clinton's phrase "it takes a village" to explain her work: "So let's build the village," she insisted.

In programs around the country, building the support "village" begins with assistance during pregnancy but continues long after the child's birth and includes medical care; fathering classes; cooking, nutrition and budgeting classes; substance abuse programs; and legal assistance. These are conducted in the languages women speak. Gallucci offers English and Spanish, as well as Amharic for the local Ethiopian community.

Especially effective is the comprehensive assistance in “adopt a relative” programs that match women without a family nearby with “cousins” who provide emotional and much other support during pregnancy and, crucially, afterward.

Wraparound care

One such effort, not limited to mothers, is the Wraparound program of A Wider Circle in Maryland, which puts together small teams for two years with the idea of getting people up on their feet. Other programs are the Family Support Office in Grand Rapids, Mich., and the Houston Pregnancy Health Center, which help new mothers for two years after they give birth and connects them with other agencies, from job training programs to low-cost housing.

“Sometimes, just help making that first intimidating phone call to the GED program makes all the difference,” Laurie Devilles, who runs a program in Austin, said. Women can remain in the program as long as needed. “We don’t ever cut anyone off.”

Sylvia Johnson in Houston helps with acute issues such as trafficking and homelessness.

Her case managers speak English and Spanish and visit women in shelters and hospitals.

“We want to break the cycle of poverty by stressing education,” she noted. “It’s difficult in this area of high poverty … but we keep talking. Maybe they catch something of it.”

Needed services

Two other services are in high demand and short supply—day care and adoption. The United States spends 0.4 percent of gross domestic

product on public support for daycare and early childhood education. New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries and France spend more 1 percent of GDP.

The United States also experiences 1 million abortions per year and 1 million families waiting to adopt a child. Those I spoke with across the country emphasized the need for adoption—traditional and "open"—to be expedited and low-cost.

Funding for programs like Johnson's and Devilles' comes from the private and faith-based sectors. But the extensive referrals—to low-cost housing, day care, GED and more—often send couples and mothers to publicly funded government programs.

Cooperation among private, faith-based and government programs is a growing reality.

One opponent of abortion, a retired Mississippi firefighter whose church runs a crisis pregnancy center, stressed funding, like the programs themselves, should not be a partisan issue.

"If people are educated and interested in the subject," he said, "they might try to see what the right thing would be for the country instead of being polarized."

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