

Traffic increasing at pregnancy support center

BY DIANA SROKA - dsroka@nwherald.com JOHNSBURG – As a mother of six, Connie Freund said she can't understand how a woman could have an abortion.

But she also knows that unplanned pregnancies can turn a woman's life upside down, bringing about tremendous amounts of stress and even causing alienation from loved ones – which is why Freund has volunteered at 1st Way Pregnancy Support Services for the past 32 years.

"They just need somebody to talk to who is unrelated and won't be judgmental," said Freund, who serves as director of the organization. "We are supportive and helpful."

There are 1st Way "life centers" in Johnsburg and Harvard, where women can receive pregnancy tests, counseling, parenting classes, baby items and other support throughout the pregnancy and afterward.

Since its founding, 1st Way has helped pregnant girls as young as 11 to women in their mid-40s.

Fifty-five volunteers staff the life center in Johnsburg five days a week and the Harvard center three days a week. They counsel women, organize diapers and clothes, handle paperwork, clean the offices and perform every other task it takes to keep the center thriving.

"The more volunteers we have, the more people we can meet with," Freund said.

Donations pay for 100 percent of the center's costs – a feat that's especially impressive, given the toll the recession has taken on charitable giving.

As the economy tanked, so did generosity. According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy, donations to the country's biggest charities dropped 11 percent in 2009.

That's the sharpest since the Chronicle began tracking donations 20 years ago.

So far 1st Way has bucked the trend. Freund said donations have held steady over the past few years. However, dollars are being stretched thinner than ever because foot traffic has nearly tripled over the past three years.

"We not only have single women coming for help, but we also have couples," Freund said.

This year alone, more than 1,000 women have been served between the two locations. Occasionally the center helps single fathers. It also pays special attention to pregnant teens – such as Dallas Sarmento and Cailee Koski.

The pair, from Fox Lake, are expecting a baby boy on Feb. 14, 2011.

They're young – 17 and 16, respectively – but said that coming to 1st Way has helped them prepare for the major changes ahead.

"Coming here, it's a lot easier," said Sarmento. "[They] go step through step with everything you need."

The pair said they've learned about what delivery will be like, prenatal and infant care, what supplies they'll need for the baby and how the newborn will act.

"It's not just some program," Koski said. "They're one on one with you. They're personal with you."

The classes Koski and Sarmiento took are part of the life center's mission to support women not just while they are expecting, but after the baby is born.

A store at the Johnsbury location is stocked with baby clothes, toys and other items.

"If we're going to help them have the baby and they are going to parent the child, they are going to need [continued] help," Freund said.