

Sparrow House relocating maternity home from city parish

Concerned that their clients are faced with too many negative influences of inner-city life, leaders of Sparrow House have decided to relocate their maternity home for women in crisis pregnancies to what they called a “safer and more effective location,” according to a recent open letter to supporters.

Sparrow House had been located in a rented, refurbished convent on the campus of St. Benedict in Baltimore, housing 24 women since its dedication two years ago. It is part of the Gabriel Network, a Bowie-based organization that provides support for women to choose life over abortion.

Three remaining women living at Sparrow House were recently placed in other maternity homes operated by the Gabriel Network.

“The area where it is currently located is not as hospitable as we would want it to be,” said Jacqueline Johnson, the Gabriel Network’s director of housing. “Once they go through our door, they are insulated. But, these are women struggling with demons, and they can easily be pulled into that lifestyle on the outside.”

Benedictine Father Paschal Morlino, pastor of St. Benedict, strongly disagreed with the Gabriel Network’s assessment of the community and the decision to leave the inner-city.

“The neighborhood is not dangerous,” Father Morlino said. “These are city girls and this is a city facility. We need ministry like this in the city.”

Father Morlino asserted that Sparrow House was not successful at its St. Benedict location because organizers “didn’t have the right mix of people there supervising.”

Sparrow House served as an entry point in the Gabriel Network’s housing program, with women staying there throughout their pregnancies before transferring to one of Gabriel Network’s other homes or another program after they gave birth.

A home in Gaithersburg will serve temporarily as the Gabriel Network's new entry point until another location can be found for Sparrow House.

Johnson said program leaders hope to keep Sparrow House in the city, but may consider locations in Baltimore County.

"It was a very difficult decision," said Johnson, noting that Sparrow House was Gabriel Network's first attempt at maintaining a home within the inner city. "We're hoping to find something by the spring."

Before joining the Gabriel Network, Sparrow House operated as an independent maternity home in Bel Air. In Baltimore, it has faced financial challenges.

Operations were suspended for several months in 2010 because of a lack of finances. Later that year, the home raised more than \$34,000 in one-time gifts and more than \$38,000 in pledges to cover its \$6,000 monthly minimum operational expenses for 2011.

Johnson said Sparrow House had received much support from donors, staff and volunteers who contributed "blood, sweat and tears" to make it a reality. It will need continued support to continue its mission, she said.

Father Morlino is exploring other options for the former Sparrow House facility.

"We are looking for some city ministry that could function there," he said.