

I first learned about Safe Haven laws while watching a documentary on WGN-TV about Riley Dunnett, known as Safe Haven “Baby #64.” She was relinquished by her biological mother at Illinois Masonic Hospital and, just three days later, became part of the Dunnett family. Riley found a loving home, and the Dunnetts welcomed a daughter who completed their family. Since then, I have followed similar stories and continue to admire the courage of mothers who, in painful circumstances, choose what they believe is best for their child’s safety and future.

Illinois enacted its Safe Haven law in 2001 to give mothers a legal and confidential way to surrender an unharmed newborn within 30 days of birth safely at any of the designated safe haven sites that include police stations and medical facilities. Awareness about these options must be proactive and widespread. Safe Haven education should be included as a required part of sex and health curriculum in every middle and high school. We students, are taught about prevention and responsibility, but we should also be taught about safety nets. Information should also reach young people during private moments of decision-making. A pamphlet or QR code explaining Safe Haven laws must be included with every pregnancy test and emergency contraception purchase. Materials distributed by organizations such as Planned Parenthood and in faith-based education pamphlets should also provide clear, factual guidance. Most importantly, sharing success stories of Safe Haven children can inspire hope and reduce the fear and stigma sometimes associated with surrender. Agents at designated surrender sites — including police stations, fire stations, and medical facilities — should be trained to respond in a compassionate and non-judgmental manner.

Since 2001, more than 160 babies in Illinois have been safely surrendered. However, during the same period, nearly 83 newborns were illegally abandoned, and about 51% of those did not survive. Approximately 41% of surrendering mothers are white, while Black and Hispanic mothers account for 25% and 15%, respectively. The diversity reflected in the statistics reinforces my belief that awareness must be broad and stigma-free. When we assume that only certain groups are affected, we unintentionally limit outreach. By recognizing that women of many ages and backgrounds use Safe Haven laws, we acknowledge a shared human vulnerability

The Safe Haven law is powerful because it acknowledges that women sometimes face moments of fear, isolation, and overwhelming pressure, yet it also creates opportunities—opportunities where knowledge can save a life. When more people understand that Safe Haven laws allow a confidential, legal surrender of a newborn at designated locations, many unsafe abandonments could be prevented. Raising awareness is not about encouraging surrender; it is about providing a safe option for those who feel they have no other option.

