

Pro-Life Wisconsin: Governor Evers signs safe haven 'baby box' bill

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Madison, WI – Today, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers signed Senate Bill (SB) 369 into law as 2023 Wisconsin Act 79. Act 79 permits the installation of newborn infant safety devices under Wisconsin's safe haven law. Authored by Sen. Joan Ballweg (R-Markesan) and Rep. Ellen Schutt (R-Clinton), SB 369 passed the Wisconsin Assembly on November 15, 2023, and the Wisconsin Senate on October 17, 2023.

“Pro-Life Wisconsin supports efforts to prevent the illegal abandonment of newborn infants, often resulting in their tragic demise, by offering ways to hand over newborns

lawfully and safely to proper authorities, said Matt Sande, Pro-Life Wisconsin Legislative Director. “Act 79 gives localities and new parents in crisis the option of safe haven baby boxes. A ‘baby box’ avoids the visible, face-to-face contact that might dissuade an otherwise willing parent from safely relinquishing his or her newborn child. We thank Senator Ballweg and Representative Schutt for their dedicated work in passing this critical legislation with bi-partisan support, and we thank Governor Evers for signing it into law. We know that it will save lives.”

Enacted in 2001, Wisconsin's safe haven law, s.48.195, allows in-person, anonymous relinquishment of newborn infants 72 hours old or younger to law enforcement officers, emergency medical services practitioners, or hospital staff members. Act 79

enhances Wisconsin's safe haven law by increasing the anonymity of the parent relinquishing his or her child. It does so by authorizing the installation of newborn infant safety devices, also known as "safe haven baby boxes," in hospitals, fire stations, and law enforcement agency buildings and allowing a parent to relinquish a child under 72 hours of age in such a device.

Act 79's safety criteria governing the baby box itself is extensive. For example, a baby box located at a hospital or law enforcement agency building must be staffed 24 hours per day. Baby boxes located at a fire station must also be staffed 24 hours per day with an emergency medical technician onsite. Furthermore, the device must be physically part of the hospital, fire station, or law enforcement agency building, must be temperature controlled and ventilated, and must be equipped with an alarm system that automatically triggers an alarm inside the building when a newborn infant is placed in the device.

"In Jefferson County, WI, a newborn infant was left for dead last March in a field near a Whitewater trailer park," said Sande. "Perhaps if the mother had known of a baby box nearby in which to place her baby boy silently and anonymously, he would be alive today and she would not be facing charges in Jefferson County Circuit Court. We must do all we can to help prevent such awful and avoidable human tragedies."

With the enactment of Act 79, fifteen states allow both face-to-face and baby box relinquishment of newborns: Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Mississippi, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Safe Haven Baby Boxes of Woodburn, IN has had over 140 legal safe haven surrenders, with thirty-six babies having been surrendered in their baby boxes.