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Emma House sanctuary for homeless moms-to-be By Cindy Stephen

Decorating the nursery, baby proofing the kitchen, installing baby monitors – these are just some of the things expectant mothers do to prepare their homes for their new arrival.

That is, if they're not waiting in line for a hot meal, searching for a warm bed or worse – looking for their next fix.

Whether homeless by choice or by force, Emma House offers shelter and a spiritual refuge for pregnant women and teens. It's a comfortable home in a middle class neighbourhood in Southwest Calgary, where women wait for the big day with people who will support them and show them the love of Jesus.

"We teach them life skills and how to care for themselves," said Pam Smid, Emma House Residence Director along with her husband Bryan. "Some are definitely scared, because for most of them it's a first time pregnancy. It's challenging at times, but they've all left a warm spot in our hearts."

"Most of these women have not had a normal up bringing. They don't have strong family models," said Jeff Adams, President of Emma Maternity House Society. "We like our Residence Directors to be a married couple to model a loving relationship between husband and wife, with no physical or emotional abuse from the husband. For many of the women, it's the first time in their lives they've seen a male behave that way."

Smid, who became Residence Director after years of volunteering for the Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre, said many of the women don't have healthy friendships. They need to learn the relationship piece," she said.

Women experiencing a crisis pregnancy are referred through The Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre, Inn From the Cold, The Drop-In Centre and The Mustard Seed. Women with addictions must go through rehab.

Emma House, which is run entirely on community and church donations, was founded by a group of concerned Christians in 1992. Jim Amsing, the society's first president and a police officer at the time, found himself siding with abortion protestors outside a northwest clinic in his district. Being a Christian, he felt led to help these women who were choosing abortion to deal with their crisis pregnancies. The manse at Emmanuel Christian Reformed Church was empty, so the group negotiated to use it as the first Emma House. Later it was sold, and a church member who was moving to Fort McMurray offered his home for the society's use.

“When Emma House first started, our typical client was a female in her late teens, who either left home or was thrown out, and the baby was given up for adoption,” said Adams. “Now they’re in their late 20’s or early 30’s with addiction problems and the want to keep their babies. They come with a lot of baggage and are less likely to take direction. That’s a bit more challenging.”

The small, intimate feeling of Emma House is a healthy atmosphere for these women, but they must leave shortly after giving birth. Adams would like to expand in some way so that women can stay up to a year or longer.

“We’d like to find to find someone to help us with that option,” he said.

Pam Smid’s wish list for Emma House includes baby items, journals, keepsake baby books and books about parenting.

“We have lots of resources about being pregnant, but none about what to do after the child is born,” said Smid, who is pregnant herself. “Many pf these girls are in dreamland right now. Reality hits when the baby comes home.”

Jeff Adams’ wish list for Emma House included a new van to transport the moms-to-be to doctor’s appointments, to school and to church on Sunday.

“Our residents are expected to be part of a church worship service on Sunday,” said Adams. “If they’re adamant that they’re not going, we don’t make them. I mean, if we were to say’ you can’t live here if you don’t go to church,’ that would upset Jesus.”

Membership in support of the Emma Maternity House Society is \$50 a year and can be purchased through their new website – www.emmahouse.ca.