

Baby business boom

EGG DONORS, SURROGATES | More women apply as economy slips

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Bad news for the economy can be good news for the baby business.

Some Chicago area fertility clinics say they've seen a surge in women inquiring about becoming egg donors or surrogates for infertile couples, apparently because of the recent economic downturn.

Melissa, at The Center for Egg Options in Northbrook, has donated eggs four times because she wants other families to have an opportunity to have children.



Summer is usually a slow period for donors, but "we have really noticed an increase in calls and inquiries and applications since about April," said Nancy Block, founder of the Center for Egg Options in Northbrook.

Robin von Halle, president of Alternative Reproductive Resources, said she has noticed a similar trend at ARR, an agency that pairs infertile couples with surrogates and egg donors.

The agency typically gets about 30 to 50 calls a day from potential donors, and for the last few months, that number has consistently been on the higher end of the scale, von Halle said.

"We get a lot of people applying to be donors and gestational surrogates at a time when jobs are hard to come by," she said. "A lot of women [are] looking to supplement their income."

Yet only a fraction of applicants are selected after undergoing a battery of physical, psychological and genetic testing.

Nazca Fontes, director of ConceiveAbilities, said she hasn't seen an increase in donor applications because her agency recruits older, more educated egg donors who are "a little bit more recession-proof."

Egg donors make about \$7,000 and are allowed to donate up to six times, von Halle said. Surrogates make as much as \$30,000 to carry someone else's child.

Melissa, an anonymous egg donor, said she has donated four times because "I have two children of my own, and I definitely wanted other families to be able to have that opportunity."

But the money was also a motivating factor, she said.

"For my family, it wasn't a necessity, but it was a nice nest egg if things should get worse," the 28-year-old said. "My husband is in construction, and ... that's not doing so well right now."

Stephanie, a 24-year-old bartender who works two jobs, said she applied to be an egg donor two months ago because she needed money for college and didn't want to take out loans.

While the economic slump seems to be driving more women toward egg donation and surrogacy, it hasn't done much to dull demand for assisted reproduction among infertile couples.

That could be because Illinois is one of a handful of states that mandates insurance coverage for in-vitro fertilization.

"We haven't seen a change yet based on the economy. You'd have to look at states where patients pay out of pocket," said Dr. Brian Kaplan with Fertility Centers of Illinois, one of the largest IVF centers in the country.

About 40,000 children are born each year in the United States through donor egg and sperm.