

THE TENNESSEAN

August 17, 2012

Knoxville abortion clinic blames closure on new TN law

Loss of Knoxville office leaves 8 providers in TN

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/ The Tennessean*

A longtime Knoxville abortion provider closed its doors, blaming a newly enacted Tennessee law that requires doctors performing abortions to hold admitting privileges at local hospitals.

The Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic had two physicians providing abortions. One died after suffering a stroke within days of obtaining hospital privileges, said clinic director Deb Walsh. Another retired physician working with the clinic has not obtained privileges.

"I've been able to keep the doors open and the phone staff working up until this week," Walsh wrote in a public letter titled, "End of an Era."

"We've been working on legal remedies, injunction, etc., but I was unable to bridge the financial gap of paying the monthly lease and operating expenses without knowing when we could resume seeing patients."

The clinic's closure drops to eight the number of abortion clinics operating in the state, down from 16 a decade ago. It also illuminates the challenges facing abortion providers in Tennessee — and in other states that have recently enacted or are considering similar laws — to comply when doctors willing to provide abortions are hard to come by at all.

Clinics in some cases turn to retired physicians or physicians from out of state who may be less likely to be able to meet the criteria for hospitals, which often require doctors to admit certain minimum number of patients to obtain privileges.

The 38-year-old Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic, however, is the first clinic in the country to close down this year over so-called TRAP laws, a moniker given by abortion advocates that stands for "targeted regulation of abortion providers," according to Vicki Saporta, president and CEO of the National Abortion Federation.

"These laws are politically motivated and have nothing to do with improving patient care," Saporta said. "They're aimed at shutting down clinics."

Lawsuit possible

Saporta said her organization is working with remaining clinics in the state to assist in finding physicians. Legal challenges may also be possible, she said.

"Whether or not a legal challenge is appropriate is being reviewed and in the meantime clinics are working to meet the requirements," Saporta said. "The only parties that this ultimately hurts are the women who need to access abortion care and who then have to travel great distances to get the care they need when the clinics that provide the care are not able to meet politically motivated requirements."

Pro-life advocates, however, say the goal of the laws has been to ensure facilities provide safe and adequate care.

“We’re grateful to the legislators who ensured that the most basic common-sense policies and protections were put in place to safeguard the health and well being of women in our state,” said Brian Harris, president of Tennessee Right to Life, which lobbied for Tennessee’s law, known as the Life Defense Act. “The closure may be a byproduct, but that was not the goal of the legislation.”

In Knoxville, the closure will probably mean the city’s other surgical abortion provider will see more patients who will have to wait longer for appointments — even while that clinic struggles to comply with the new law, said co-director Corinne Rovetti, who is also a nurse practitioner.

The Knoxville Center for Reproductive health shared a doctor with the now-closed Volunteer Women’s Medical Clinic.

In May, Dr. Morris Campbell obtained admitting privileges at University of Tennessee Medical Center. He died five days later. He was both a doctor providing services at the Volunteer Women’s Medical Clinic and the medical director of the Knoxville Center for Reproductive Health.

In addition to losing Campbell, the Knoxville Center for Reproductive Health lost another part-time physician who had stepped forward to help after “she felt intimidated by pro-life protestors,” Rovetti said.

The clinic is relying now on two part-time doctors with their own private practices who already have admitting privileges locally.

“Beyond what it means for us, we are just really saddened by Volunteer having to close,” she said.

Opponents thankful

Knoxville resident Lisa Morris said she has devoted many years to ending abortion, and she is overjoyed.

A former flight attendant, Morris has volunteered nearly full time for five years, praying outside the Volunteer clinic and hoping women seeking abortions will change their minds.

“Right now we are just thanking God for the incredible victory,” she said. “We know there’s still a lot more work to be done. We know there are other clinics and one by one we are going to reach the doctors and clinic workers to share the truth.”

In 2014 Tennessee voters will consider a constitutional amendment that would remove the right to an abortion for Tennessee women, an issue explored in May in a Tennessean special report, [“http://www.tennessean.com/section/projects34” alt="" title="" target="_blank">Abortion in Tennessee.](http://www.tennessean.com/section/projects34)
