

## Local teacher's abortion death under investigation in Maryland

Written by Jorge Fitz-Gibbon, Randi Weiner and Shawn Cohen  
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Authorities in Maryland said Monday that they are investigating the death of a 29-year-old New Rochelle woman who reportedly traveled to the Washington, D.C., suburbs for a late-term abortion.

Jennifer Morbelli, a full-time substitute teacher at the Church Street School in White Plains, died Thursday at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital, prompting an investigation by the Montgomery County medical examiner, a probe that has also involved the Montgomery County Police Department.

According to an Associated Press report, Morbelli went to the Rockville, Md., hospital after being treated at Germantown Reproductive Health Services, a separate clinic.

The story has sparked a fierce online debate among abortion opponents. Kathy Morbelli, the dead woman's mother-in-law, told The Journal News that she is extremely upset with the rhetoric swirling around the death of Morbelli and her unborn daughter, who was to be known as Madison Leigh.

"They know she was a wanted baby, they know she was named," she said. "I just wish that the people could let my son, who is only 29 years old, mourn in peace.... We have no comment on the doctor."

"Jennifer meant everything to this family," Morbelli added. "We've lost a wonderful person and we've lost our granddaughter."

Investigators in Maryland said that, while the probe into Jennifer Morbelli's death is ongoing, there is currently no indication of criminal activity.

"I can confirm that, yes, there is a death investigation being coordinated by the Medical Examiner's Office and the Montgomery Police Department has been notified," said Lucille Baur, a spokeswoman for the police department.

Bruce Goldfarb, a spokesman for the medical examiner, said the office was "investigating the cause and manner of death" of Morbelli, but would not provide details.

"This is a routine death investigation," he said. "Anytime somebody dies during a medical procedure it's referred to this office. So it's a routine matter. There is no timetable. Things happen when they happen."

Calls to the Germantown clinic were not returned. Marisa Levine, a spokeswoman at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital, declined comment, citing patient privacy laws.

Abortion opponents say Morbelli was undergoing an abortion at the clinic, run by Dr. LeRoy Carhart. The clinic is frequently the site of demonstrations because abortion opponents say Carhart routinely performs dangerous late-term procedures. Abortion-rights advocates have defended Carhart, saying he performs procedures that other physicians have backed away from.

But Carhart, 69, has been a major target of the anti-abortion movement for years. According to a 2012 documentary titled "After Tiller," previewed at the Sundance Film Festival last month, Carhart is one of only four doctors in the United States known to provide late-term abortions.

The film gets its title from Dr. George Tiller, a former colleague of Carhart's, who was shot and killed in 2009 while attending church in Kansas.

Published reports said Carhart, of Nebraska, ceased performing the procedures in his home state after the state legislature in 2010 banned abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy. Shortly after the vote, his home and barn were burned down.

He now travels to Maryland to perform the procedures there.

The Rev. Frank Pavone, a Catholic priest from Port Chester who heads the anti-abortion group Priests for Life, said Morbelli was 33 weeks pregnant and died after “she developed complications, and Carhart could not be contacted to take care of her.”

“From what we see so far, there was a negligence here,” said Pavone, who led a vigil outside the Germantown clinic on Monday. “Unfortunately, we see it as a pattern in these abortion facilities, and we just want to draw attention to it. We’re urging the state of Maryland to do what they’re supposed to do: Investigate, inform the laws that are in place, and bring to light what really happened.”

At the Coxe & Graziano Funeral Home on East Boston Post Road, Mamaroneck, scores of mourners attended calling hours for Morbelli on Monday evening. Several members of the New Rochelle Police Department — where Morbelli’s father, Kevin McKenna, is a detective — attended the wake. Few people wished to comment, but several said Morbelli was a beautiful woman and good teacher from a good family.

Additional calling hours are scheduled for 2 to 4 p.m. Tuesday. A funeral Mass will be held at 10 a.m. Wednesday at the Holy Name of Jesus Church in New Rochelle.

Morbelli was assigned to the Church Street School in White Plains, said schools Superintendent Christopher P. Clouet. “It’s an unspeakable tragedy and we’re saddened by the loss to our school community,” he said. “A lot of people are very upset; (there are) a lot of tears and sense of heartbrokenness.”

Students and staff were speaking with counselors Monday, administrators said.

Contributions are being made in Morbelli’s memory to the St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

The Associated Press and staff writer James O’Rourke contributed to this report.