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Planned Parenthood announces expansion to new Highway 6 facility

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Officials said the new Audre Rapoport Planned Parenthood Health Center at Highway 6 and Sanger Avenue will offer easier access and better visibility than the location on Ross Avenue it will replace. It is set to open this month.

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Staff photo — Jerry Larson

The local Planned Parenthood center is getting a new name and new building that will offer a more visible location and more space designed to meet patients' needs, volunteers said.

The \$4.3 million, 9,000-square-foot Audre Rapoport Planned Parenthood Health Center will open this month at 700 West Highway 6, between Bosque Boulevard and Sanger Avenue. The new facility will replace the Mary Ruth Duncan Women's Health Center on Ross Avenue, which Planned Parenthood has operated since 1963.

“The facility embodies the respect that all of our staff and all of our supporters have for our patients,” volunteer Kris Olson said. “That’s why we exist. For them to see a facility that says, ‘You’re worthy of this. Regardless of who you are, where you come from, what you can or can’t pay, you have the dignity of a human being and deserve to be in a space that is this beautiful.’ ”

The building is divided into three sections designed to address the three main services it will offer: family planning services, abortion services, and education advocacy, plus space for administration.

The organization’s facility on Ross Avenue served its needs well, but it was time for an upgrade, spokeswoman Stephanie Mabry said. The new space will be more efficient and make Planned Parenthood more visible, adjacent to a highway and in the medical district, Mabry said.

“We have heard from our patients that sometimes they don’t know where we are,” she said. “It is important to us that our patients know that we’re here to provide care, and that’s what this whole thing is about. This is about continuing a mission to serve those no matter their circumstance. It is important that we be highly accessible which is why we want to be highly visible and to remain in the medical community.”

The location is also next to a bus stop, giving easy access, Olson said.

Of the \$4.3 million for the health center, the organization has raised \$3.2 million, Mabry said. Volunteers believe they will be able to secure the remaining \$1.1 million through public donations after announcing the new facility. To date, half of the donations for the new facility have come from the Waco community, she said.

A location next to the highway is also important because data shows patients travel to the Waco Planned Parenthood from more rural areas, especially for a safe, legal space to receive abortion services, Mabry said.

The family planning services offered encompass a full range of birth control services, including emergency contraception and long-acting reversible contraception, such as intrauterin devices and implants, she said. Breast and cervical cancer screenings are also offered. Texas has one of the highest rates of cervical cancer, Mabry said. The Audre Rapoport Planned Parenthood Health Center is the only provider in the area that offers same-day insertions for IUDs and implants, she said.

The center restored access to abortion services in May after the Supreme Court struck down House Bill 2, she said. Before that, the clinic served 800 patients a year, she said.

“Per law, family planning and abortion services are physically and financially separate,” Mabry said. “They are two separate licensed health care centers. This is a separate entrance with separate check-in and separate waiting room.”

Family planning services sees about 4,000 patients a year, she said. The clinic just added a second nurse practitioner, so the number of patients receiving family planning services is expected to increase, Mabry said.

Every \$1 invested in family planning, represents a \$7 savings for Medicaid, Mabry said. The expansion is about improving the quality of life for people in the area and investing in a healthier community, she said.

The clinic offers health care services for women, men and young people through online, same day, and walk-in appointments for a variety of services, including midlife care, referrals for adoption and prenatal care, and community health education programs to reduce unintended teen pregnancies.

The new location is a game changer, Pro-Life Waco Director John Pisciotta said.

“Planned Parenthood was relatively hidden from the view of the city in their Ross Avenue clinic and now they are right in the open view,” Pisciotta said.

He said his group long suspected the building to be the future home of Planned Parenthood.

Pisciotta said the group just completed a “40 Days for Life” campaign outside Planned Parenthood in which more than 300 volunteers took turns praying outside the location. With the news of Planned Parenthood’s more visible location, he expects more than 1,000 volunteers to attend next year’s prayer campaign, Pisciotta said.

“We’ll see how eager the people of Woodway and Waco are to have abortion right in their face, right on Highway 6, right so the public can see it,” he said.

Deborah McGregor, CEO of Care Net Of Central Texas and cosponsor of the “40 Days for Life” vigil, said she believes Planned Parenthood’s move to the highway is about getting more money.

“This is not about the heart and soul of our very town,” McGregor said. “What’s happening is they are bringing abortion into Waco. It’s not Waco people that needed it.”

McGregor said she believes through the work of Care Net, the culture in Waco and McLennan County has changed to the point that abortion has become unnecessary. Everyone can have their own idea about whether abortion is wrong or right, but the community has stepped up and said they will support women who become pregnant by providing help, rather than just telling them to get an abortion, she said.

Care Net owns the property at 7110 Sanger Ave. adjacent to Planned Parenthood’s new facility, she said. The organization is halfway through a \$2 million fundraising campaign and will be ready to resume protests when Planned Parenthood opens its doors at its new location, McGregor said.