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TOP STORY

Planned Parenthood move to West Ashley means the group is doing abortions for first time in the area

By Mary Katherine Wildeman mkwildeman@postandcourier.com Apr 18, 2018 Updated 3 hrs ago



Planned Parenthood has a new clinic in West Ashley. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

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For years, any women who wanted an abortion showed up to the Planned Parenthood clinic on Rutledge Avenue in Charleston.

But staff there didn't perform abortions and always sent the women to an unaffiliated clinic in West Ashley. Now, with Planned Parenthood's purchase and renovation of the Charleston Women's Medical Center on Ashley River Road, abortions and other family planning services are now offered under one roof.

Planned Parenthood bought the clinic late last year and opened its doors to patients in January.

Planned Parenthood already operates a clinic in Columbia where abortions are performed. Rather than shying away from the controversy, staff at the new Planned Parenthood clinic in West Ashley say they are proud to be offering abortions under the organization's name for the first time in Charleston, representing an expansion of the group's presence in the Lowcountry.

Abortions were not available anywhere in Charleston between the closing of the old clinic on Nov. 13 and its re-opening under Planned Parenthood's name. Staff said the clinic had a soft opening at the end of January and went to full hours of operation in mid-February.

Stacy Ford, a nurse practitioner who has worked for Planned Parenthood for more than 25 years, said trust in the Planned Parenthood name and the quality of what they offer makes a difference to patients.

Planned Parenthood bought the space for \$1.2 million, according to Charleston County property records. They also sold the Rutledge Avenue clinic for the same amount. The Ashley River Road clinic has more than 7,000 square feet of space, compared to the roughly 2,000 square feet at the Rutledge Avenue office.

The care being offered at Planned Parenthood has also changed. They hired a urologist and will begin to offer vasectomies. They have also recently begun offering transgender hormone therapy, which Ford said became so popular that the demand was flooding the smaller clinic.

Ford said she has seen patients travel three hours from Savannah and Myrtle Beach to seek care from Planned Parenthood. With the hardship of travel, she said it's important all the services those patients might need be available in one place. The more spacious site also allows for shorter wait times and more streamlined visits, Ford said.

Erica Stine, who has volunteered at both the Charleston Women's Medical Center and the Planned Parenthood location on Rutledge Avenue, said the quality of care offered won't change hands under the new ownership. But the interior of the center has changed dramatically, she said.

The Ashley River Road location got a major face-lift in recent months, and includes exam rooms, a separate area for surgery, a lab, a pharmacy and consultation rooms.

"It finally felt like the clinic that it needed to be," she said.

Meanwhile, protests near the clinic on Ashley River Road have continued.

Alex Palyo of the group Pro-Life Charleston called Planned Parenthood a "bad actor" Wednesday in an announcement to the news media. Palyo was promoting a prayer vigil and a protest to support defunding the organization on April 28.

"We don't give life, life is given to us by our creator," Palyo said. "It's for him to take it."

Palyo said it matters little to him whether the Charleston Women's Medical Center or Planned Parenthood are the ones in the clinic. He advocates for removing Planned Parenthood's federal funding, however, and called it a "divisive" organization.

The Charleston Women's Medical Center attracted its own controversies over the years. Gary Clayton Boyle, who worked at the clinic, pleaded guilty to brandishing a weapon at anti-abortion activists who were protesting outside the center in 2010.

Gov. Nikki Haley asked the state's public health agency to investigate South Carolina's abortion clinics following the release of tapes, recorded in secret, showing Planned Parenthood officials talking about the use of fetal organs for research. The state's House Oversight Committee launched its own investigation.

The investigations led to a fine of \$1,800 for the Charleston Women's Medical Center. None of the state investigations found criminal wrongdoing or any evidence of taxpayer money being illegally spent on abortions at the three abortion clinics in South Carolina.

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