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Doctor seeks to open New Orleans East abortion clinic; rally against it is planned for Saturday

BY JESSICA WILLIAMS | JWILLIAMS@THEADVOCATE.COM OCT 12, 2018 - 1:18 PM



A Planned Parenthood supporter steps in front of an anti-abortion activist at a 2017 rally.

Jessica Williams

A New Orleans doctor has applied to perform abortions at a New Orleans East clinic, giving new fuel to a bitter ideological dispute and refocusing public attention on Louisiana's process for approving licenses for abortion establishments.

The physician, Dr. Rashonda Dean, applied in April to perform abortions at Deanz Health Care for Women on Crowder Boulevard. State health officials inspected the Crowder facility in July but have not yet granted it a permit. Dean hasn't opened the clinic for business.

But her application has nonetheless set off a firestorm among anti-abortion activists and religious leaders, dozens of whom are planning a prayer rally near the site on Saturday.

“The provision of abortion services to the community is not health care,” said Kathy Allen, the state director of Louisiana Black Advocates for Life, an anti-abortion group. “It’s important that we all understand the value of standing together and determining what kind of community we want to have – one that supports good, quality services and real health care.”

Dean, who previously worked at the lone New Orleans clinic licensed to perform the procedure – the Women's Health Care Center on Gen. Pershing Street in Uptown – said she applied to open another facility because she wants to help fill a critical need in the city.

She said rallies like the one Allen is organizing complicate what is already a tough decision for women.

“I think what these protesters don’t understand is there are many people who come to us because they need (an abortion),” Dean said.

Some women, she added, face potentially life-threatening health complications if they don't seek abortions. “They are torn, because they have a child that they truly want to keep, but that they have been advised by their physician that they can’t keep,” she said.

The local debate comes as Gov. John Bel Edwards' administration is entangled in a federal lawsuit over delays in its review of another abortion permit application, that for Planned Parenthood of Louisiana's South Claiborne Avenue location.

In that case, Planned Parenthood claims the state is purposefully ignoring its request as part of a "sham" permitting process, while the state has said investigations by the U.S Department of Justice and the attorney general in Texas into Planned Parenthood's alleged selling of fetal remains to Texas universities were reason to hold up the review. That matter is before the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The Edwards administration is also fighting in the U.S. Supreme Court over whether Planned Parenthood is entitled to state Medicaid money. The state contends it has the right to withhold all funding from the organization, even money that is not used to perform abortions. Planned

Parenthood says that practice restricts access to health services that women need.

Edwards, a Catholic Democrat, has made no secret of his strong stance against abortion, and he received an award for his views from the Democrats For Life of America in 2016. He signed a controversial law requiring doctors performing abortions to have hospital admitting privileges within 30 miles, a law that was struck down by a federal district judge but more recently upheld by a three-judge appellate panel.

Edwards has also backed other abortion restrictions criticized by pro-choice activists.

A state Department of Health spokesman said Friday the office is still reviewing Dean's application but did not say when that review would be complete.

Generally, the owners of clinics wishing to perform abortions must fill out applications, pay a \$600 fee and pass standard fire marshal and public health inspections. They must also submit details about their governance and administrative staff, according to state rules.

With the state's review pending, Dean said women seeking abortions have few options in Louisiana: the Gen. Pershing Street facility, which can have long waiting times, or similar facilities in Baton Rouge and Shreveport.

She said she wouldn't be surprised if she faces a long wait of her own for approval, given the strong anti-abortion sentiments across the state.

"What keeps me going is I know this service is needed, and there are not too many people who are willing to provide it, given the climate we have to go through," Dean said.

But Allen said abortion providers like Dean seek to profit from "the deaths of potential community members." As for the claim that abortion is necessary in some cases when the mother's life could be endangered, Allen said it's often hard to be sure of such things.

"You can never know with certainty whether a pregnancy is going to turn out in a bad way," she said. "We like to err on the side of life."

The rally is to be held at 5427 Crowder Blvd. — two lots away from Dean's building — at 10 a.m. Saturday. New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond is expected to attend, as are other leaders from various Christian denominations.

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