

---

# The Virginian-Pilot

PilotOnline.com

## Norfolk abortion clinic plans to close doors

- [Amy Jeter](#)
- Apr 19, 2013

Original article found online at: [http://pilotonline.com/news/local/health/norfolk-abortion-clinic-plans-to-close-doors/article\\_9f3c5be9-f4b0-5265-9152-1ca901290a85.html](http://pilotonline.com/news/local/health/norfolk-abortion-clinic-plans-to-close-doors/article_9f3c5be9-f4b0-5265-9152-1ca901290a85.html)

### NORFOLK

Pickers couldn't do it.

Neither could a bomber, an arsonist or an anti-abortion activist firing two dozen bullets into the building on East Little Creek Road.

For four decades, Hillcrest Clinic - South Hampton Roads' first medical facility devoted to providing legal abortions - defied efforts to close its doors.

That run ends Saturday.

Virginia's new licensing standards for abortion clinics, coupled with a drop in demand for pregnancy terminations, have driven the clinic out of business.

"It's a little bit bittersweet," said Suzette Caton, Hillcrest's director. "But I also feel like for 40 years we've had the honor of providing compassionate care to the women in Tidewater who are faced with an unplanned pregnancy. The staff upheld what the philosophy of the clinic was, and that was to ensure that women had access to a safe, legal abortion."

Word of Hillcrest's closure brought tears of joy to anti-abortion activists who had picketed the clinic for years.

"Prayers are always answered," said Christine Martinez, who demonstrated outside Hillcrest regularly for more than 15 years. "And the prayers are answered in God's time, not ours."

News of the closure comes a week after the Virginia Board of Health gave its final approval to strict rules for facilities where at least five first-trimester abortions are performed each month.

The regulations stem from a law passed by the General Assembly in 2011. For the past two years, government officials, state health leaders, clinics and activists have argued over the best way to implement the legislation.

Much of the dispute revolves around architectural standards that require clinics to meet hospital design guidelines, such as hallway size, number of toilets and number of parking spaces.

Supporters say the regulations promote women's health and safety.

Victoria Cobb, president of the Family Foundation of Virginia, said she trusted medical professionals to come up with appropriate standards.

"If folks want to invest in the health and safety of women - in the health standards - you'd think they'd be able to find the funds to do that," she said.

Critics say the regulations constitute a political attempt to close abortion facilities by requiring expensive upgrades that are unnecessary for quality patient care.

"I can do plastic surgery. I can stick needles in babies' lungs. I can put tubes up penises and into bladders, and do all sorts of crazy stuff in my office with no regulations whatsoever. No government supervision," said Dr. David Peters, owner and medical director of Tidewater Women's Health Clinic in Norfolk. "But for an abortion, I've got to have the sterile room - the size of the building matters - so, it just becomes nonsensical."

Hillcrest and 19 other clinics in the state were granted licenses last year under preliminary regulations, said Erik Bodin, director of the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Licensure and Certification. The facilities have two years from their original licensure to comply with the building standards.

Hillcrest is the only one to indicate that it won't be seeking renewal, Bodin said.

The other three clinics in South Hampton Roads said they anticipate meeting the new requirements.

Built in 2010, Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Virginia's Newtown Road facility already complies, said CEO Sarah Meacham. Tidewater Women's Health Clinic requires about \$100,000 in renovations, Peters said. A spokeswoman for Virginia Women's Wellness said in an email that "we do intend to make any changes required to ensure our office stays open."

Architects estimated Hillcrest would need \$500,000 in renovations - including changing ventilation and temperature controls - to meet the standards, Caton said.

But that was just one reason Hillcrest made the decision to go out of business. Costs of supplies and staffing have risen, she said, while the number of women seeking to end their pregnancies has declined.

Hillcrest provided 1,629 abortions last year, compared with 2,116 in 2009, according to the state health department. The overall number of abortions in South Hampton Roads declined by nearly 18 percent in that time.

Caton credited abortion providers for the decrease:

"They're the counselors and medical staff that took the time to help women find a method of birth control that was going to work for them."

Hillcrest Clinic and Counseling Service opened to mixed reaction in October 1973, nine months after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision deemed it a woman's right to choose whether to end her pregnancy.

A Washington doctor had decided there was a need in Norfolk after seeing about 20 patients from Tidewater each week, and the local head of Planned Parenthood said the demand for abortions in Norfolk exceeded what physicians could perform in the hospitals, according to published reports.

Pete Barker, 81, now a retired real estate broker, demonstrated against Hillcrest on the day it opened: "If I remember right, that was the first time we had a place to picket."

He and other protesters made regular visits to the clinic over its 40-year history. Barker preferred signs that read "God is Pro-Life," "Honk for Life" and simply "Adoption."

At times, Hillcrest's dance with protesters landed in Norfolk's courtrooms.

Occasionally, it became threatening, as in May 1989 when six activists pushed their way into the building.

It turned violent more than once, though no one was ever hurt.

In 1983, a man broke in, poured kerosene throughout the office and set it ablaze. A year later, a cluster of pipe bombs exploded nearby, breaking a plate glass window of the bank branch on the first floor.

In December 1994, Hillcrest made national news when John C. Salvi III opened fire on its building with a semi-automatic rifle a day after he'd killed two people and injured five at two clinics outside Boston.

Some staff members admitted to feeling unsettled. But, Caton said, in her 28 years at the clinic, she can't recall a time when threats led to a conversation about closing.

"I don't remember hearing anyone say, 'It's time,' " she said, "or 'Enough is enough.' "