

At an Abortion Clinic: Protesters, Patients, and Escorts

By [Sybile Penhirin](#) on February 12, 2014

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Clinic Escorts and anti-abortion protesters near Choices Women's Medical Center, in Jamaica, Queens. Credits: Sybile Penhirin

Clarification: This story has been modified to make clearer the reasons for the drop in the state abortion rate.

On Saturday, February 8, at a few minutes after 7 a.m., a dozen picketers set up on the sidewalk near the bus stop at Jamaica Avenue and 147th street in Queens. Some held large signs showing photos of a bloody fetus, under the words “Abortion” or “Choice.” Others handed out brochures to passersby or talked about the Bible. From time to time, one of them would break out into a religious hymn. They dotted the route from the bus stop to the entrance of [Choices Women’s Medical Center](#), just a few yards further down 147th street.

So did the escorts— women wearing white lab coats and badges that read “Clinic Choices Escort.” They stood in small clusters, a dozen of them, and paid no attention to the demonstrators.

The two groups were less than six feet apart. Each was carefully scanning the street.

These two groups have been facing each other every Saturday morning since the clinic opened in Jamaica about two years ago. Choices Women’s Medical Center staff members said Saturday mornings are the busiest time of the week, as many of their patients are off work on that day. The clinic is one of approximately 90 centers in New York State offering abortion services, as well as other women’s healthcare services, such as pre-natal care or gynecology consultations.

The number of clinics providing abortion services in New York has declined by 9% between 2008 and 2011, according to [a study](#) recently published by the Guttmacher Institute. Meanwhile, the state abortion rate has also declined, reaching [its lowest level](#) since abortion became legal in 1973, according to the same study. A similar pattern was observed in almost every state. Approximately 1.7% of women aged 15–44 and living in the U.S. had an abortion in 2011, down from almost 3% in the 1980, the study found.

Over the same period, the birth rate also declined. A simultaneous drop in the abortion rate and the birth rate suggests fewer women experiencing unintended pregnancies, said Jenna Jerman, one of the study authors.

“One likely reason for the decline in the abortion rate was fewer women were getting pregnant, likely due to more effective contraception,” she said.

Still, with about 34 abortions per 1000 women, New York State has one of the highest abortion rates in the country. While Jerman pointed out she could not give a conclusive explanation, she said New York had one of the fewest barriers to abortion. “It’s also an area where residents are just more geographically concentrated, and so it is easier for women to find a provider,” she said.

Mary Lou Greenberg, who works for the Choices Women’s Medical Center, said picketers protested in front of the center even before the clinic officially opened. A women’s rights activist for decades, Greenberg said she reached out to NOW NYC, an organization advocating for women’s rights, once she understood demonstrators were going to come on a regular basis.

Since then, [NOW NYC](#) has been providing the clinic with volunteers who serve as clinic escorts—a buffer between the demonstrators and the patients trying to reach the clinic. Clinic escorts approach every patient, regardless of what service they are coming for. “They’re here to get patients in,” Greenberg said.

Many of the volunteers—mostly women—did not want to give their names, saying they feared harassment from the protesters. Some of them said that picketers had tracked them down at work or at home, or use their names to hassle them. “It’s hard emotionally when you stand a few feet away from them for five hours,” a clinic escort said.

Demonstrators mostly did not want to give their names either. Some said they were here to represent the Lord. Others said the media are biased and therefore they did not want to speak with reporters.

Around 7.30 a.m., a young lady with what seemed to be her boyfriend appeared around the street corner. Immediately a few clinic escorts walked toward her: “Hi, I’m with the clinic. Do you want me to walk with you to the clinic?” one of them said. The girl nodded.

At the same time, protesters also hurried towards her. “Please don’t kill your baby. You have a choice. *No mata tu hijo*,” they shouted as the woman rushed, her head down, toward the clinic.

“The judgment day is coming,” a protester shouted.

Between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. on a recent Saturday morning, that same situation occurred dozens of times as women walked to the clinic. Some patients wore sunglasses. Some shouted back at the protesters. A few women refused to be escorted. All of them walked toward the clinic with haste. No woman walking towards the clinic was seen turning away.

“When you think about it, abortion is the only procedure that requires escorts for people to get it,” said Greenberg, who was also wearing a white lab coat and the clinic escort badge. Rachel Goldfarb, a clinic escort for a year, said the hardest part of the job was to see the look on the women’s faces when they realize a group of protesters is waiting for them. “They are so scared when they see the protesters,” Goldfarb said.

“More people need to be aware of this situation. We’re in a blue state, in a very progressive city and yet, this is happening,” she said while a protesters nearby was reading excerpts of the Bible aloud.

The protesters, of course, have a different perspective. “Yes, abortion is legal but so was slavery,” said Pastor Ken Griep, from the [Church at the Rock](#), on East 92nd Street near Flatlands Ave. in Brooklyn. A handful of protesters said they belong to that church but only Griep agreed to give his name. “I live in a country that is against murder, so when I see murder I want to stand up for the victims,” he said. He was holding a large sign showing a photo of bloody fetus limbs on a 25-cent coin. “I’m here to speak for the voiceless,” he said.

Right in front of the clinic entrance, a tall man holding a tiny plastic baby, which he said he had ordered online, was preaching the gospel. “We’re bringing you before the Lord,” he shouted. “We’re praying for you. Repent now, turn now! Have mercy, give birth and avoid killing.” Clinic escorts standing in front of him ignored him and distributed hand warmers to each other.

Holding a sign that read, “Babies are murdered here,” 20 year-old Gloria Nicotra, said she was at the clinic for the first time. She said she felt a little nervous as she was trying to talk to the women entering the clinic. A pre-medical student in Queens College, Nicotra had come with her dad, a regular demonstrator. Both were parishioners from the [Grace Baptist Church](#), in Woodhaven, Queens.

“If only one woman decides to turn away then one life is saved and we’ve made a difference,” she said, repeating what many protesters had explained.

Around 9.30 a.m., about 15 new protesters arrived, bringing the number of demonstrators to about 30 people and outnumbering the 15 or so escorts. But by then, it seemed that most of the morning patients had already entered the clinic.