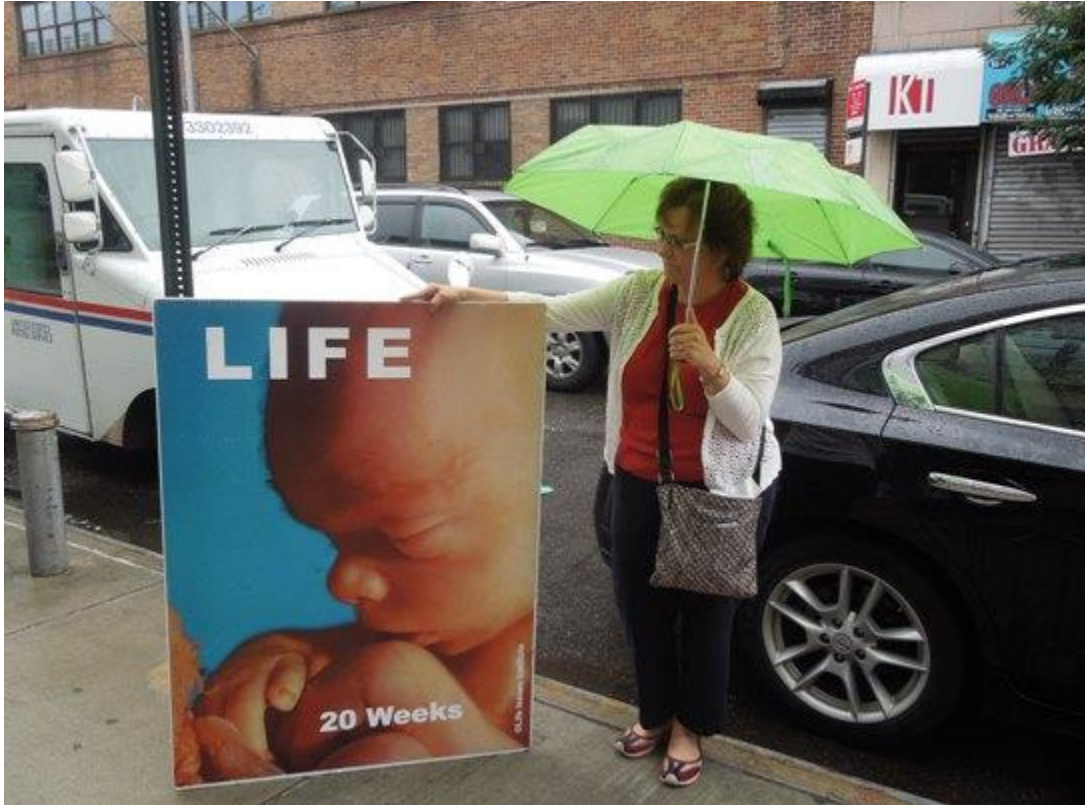


# Jamaica women's clinic attracts anti-abortion demonstrations



**THE COURIER/Photos by Katrina Medoff**

Lois Griep holds a poster, and says that her church brings these signs because “a picture is worth a thousand words.” The opposite side of the poster depicts a bloody fetus.

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Seven patient escorts in white lab coats and 13 anti-abortion demonstrators holding pamphlets and large, graphic posters depicting bloody fetuses stood poised in the rain at the corner of Jamaica Avenue and 147th Place on Saturday, waiting for patients to approach [Choices Women's Medical Clinic](#).

A patient reached for the side door of the clinic, and everyone snapped into action: two escorts began guiding the woman toward the patient entrance, and a man stepped in front of them.

“Don’t go to Choices, ma’am,” he said. “Don’t go kill the baby, ma’am. Don’t go in there, they kill babies, ma’am. They kill babies, ma’am. Look at that picture,” he said, pointing at one of the signs. “You don’t have to do that.”

The patient stood frozen as pamphlet-wielding women with similar refrains competed for her attention with one of the escorts, who attempted to reassure her and move her forward.

Finally, the woman headed toward the entrance, flanked by the escorts. The man followed, leaning around an escort’s umbrella — used as a makeshift shield — and repeating his plea until the patient was through the clinic door.



Such scenes have been occurring regularly ever since Choices moved to Jamaica two and a half years ago, and a group from [Church @ the Rock](#) in Brooklyn started coming to the clinic every Saturday at about 6:45 a.m.

“We call it ‘Saturday mournings’ because babies are being murdered and we’re here to stand up for these babies,” said Pat, 60, a woman from Church @ the Rock, who was holding a sign depicting a latex-gloved hand holding a bloody fetus.

On recent (sunnier) Saturdays, there have been about 20 escorts and 20 demonstrators from Church @ the Rock as well as from Catholic groups, said a volunteer clinic escort leader, 25, from the New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women.

“We’ve been here in the ice cold, in the heat of summer,” said Lois Griep, 62, wife of Pastor Kenneth Griep of Church @ the Rock.

Choices has had several homes in its 43 years, including Flushing, Rego Park and Long Island City, said Merle Hoffman, president, founder and CEO of the clinic, but demonstrators began coming out “en masse” only after the move to Jamaica, where there is a “dearth of prenatal care.”

“As soon as we moved, these people started coming. In fact, they started demonstrating at the location even before it opened,” said Mary Lou Greenberg, the Choices volunteer escort program director. “I realized that we would need a regular escort program because they would set up their signs so it’s a gauntlet.”

Escorts hail from all over the area, including Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island. One escort from Jersey City wakes up at 4:30 a.m. to arrive at 7 a.m.

Some patients walking into the clinic are getting abortions, according to a Choices administrator, but many visit Choices for other services such as family planning, counseling and gynecological services such as STI testing, breast exams and pap smears.

Hoffman says demonstrators are “bullying, harassing women attempting to walk into the facility,” regardless of their reasons for visiting the clinic — as well as passersby.

One escort, “Chickie,” 60, of Jamaica, says that the demonstrators “intimidate children.”

“You have a woman coming in for a prenatal visit, visibly pregnant, with another child,” Hoffman said, “and one of [the demonstrators] said to the kid, ‘Why is your mommy taking you in there? Don’t you know she’s going in to kill your little brother or sister?’”

Griep counters that women visiting Choices for prenatal care is “great,” but that “this particular clinic, if you go to their website ... the first tab they have after their homepage is ‘Abortion.’”

One Choices administrator stressed that the clinic is affiliated with adoption agencies across the nation and with organizations that offer parenting classes, offering women resources no matter what decision they make when pregnant.



Some patients feel the need to tell the demonstrators why they are at the clinic in the hope that demonstrators will leave them alone, even though they would not need to explain why they were visiting any other medical facility, said Esther Priegue, director of social services at Choices.

Nearby businesses say they are affected by the demonstrators. Rigo Mendez, 30, of Corona, manager of Smilen Brothers Market across the street from the clinic, says that customers are deterred by the graphic signs nearby.

“In the morning, when the customers come in, they always complain about the pictures,” Mendez said. “They want to come and eat breakfast and they see the pictures and they say, ‘[Why don’t] you guys tell them to move?’ Business is going down on Saturdays.”

And a cashier at Popular Varieties & Gifts, located next door to the clinic, said, “When they’re outside, less people come in because sometimes the posters that they’re holding up, people are disgusted, they look away and don’t see the store. Or [the customers] are followed because [the demonstrators] all assume that they’re going to the clinic or something.”

The issue of demonstrators outside of abortion clinics is front and center not only in Queens but across the nation after a June Supreme Court decision that ruled that Massachusetts’ 35-foot buffer zone law restricted free speech. Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. pointed to New York City’s laws that forbid obstructing access to a clinic or following or harassing patients within 15 feet of a clinic, according to a recent article in the [New York Times](#).

But in Jamaica, it seems that issues of harassment, intimidation, actively impeding patients and free speech are not often clear-cut, and that it's difficult to tell when a line is crossed.

“It can be so very nebulous at times,” Chickie said.