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Planned Parenthood to offer abortion pills

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“We’re thrilled with this expansion of services,” Planned Parenthood board member Lyn Schollett of Springfield said Wednesday. “I think we’ll actually find there’s a lot of support for these services in the community.”

Planned Parenthood officials have discussed the need for easier access to abortion services in the Springfield area for years, said Steve Trombley, president and chief executive officer of Chicago-based Planned Parenthood.

The closest abortion providers are at least a 90-minute drive away in Peoria, Champaign and Granite City, he said and women seeking abortions often face financial and emotional hardships in traveling to those and other locations.

When Planned Parenthood affiliates around the state consolidated into one not-for-profit organization in 2008, Trombley said, expertise became available to provide what is known as “medication abortion” through the group’s Springfield health center at 1000 E. Washington St.

“It was a natural choice to expand services,” he said.

Springfield is the seventh-largest metropolitan area in the United States with a Planned Parenthood health center where elective abortions aren’t available in the community, he said.

Medication abortions allow women during the first trimester of their pregnancies to complete abortions in the privacy of their homes. A woman first takes a drug called mifepristone at a clinic or doctor’s office, and a second, misoprostol, later at home.

The experience is similar to a miscarriage, Trombley said.

No approval is needed from either local or state officials to begin the service, he said. The local agency will be providing medication abortions sometime in the first half of 2010, Trombley said.

Medication abortions, first approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2000, represent about 14 percent of all abortions nationwide.

Trombley said Planned Parenthood will provide medication abortions in Springfield, rather than surgical abortions, because the medication approach requires less space, expense and other resources. Planned Parenthood offers both surgical and medication abortions at health centers in Aurora and Chicago.

Private doctors could provide medication abortions through their offices, but no physician in the Springfield area does so, Planned Parenthood officials said.

An opinion issued in March by Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan made the process of providing medication abortion potentially less cumbersome. Madigan wrote that Illinois law allows nurse practitioners and physician assistants to hand a patient her first dose of medicine.

Before Madigan's opinion, Planned Parenthood used doctors to take that first step, Trombley said.

When asked how Planned Parenthood would respond to the possibility of pro-life protesters at the Springfield site, Trombley said additional security measures will be put in place to protect the safety and privacy of patients. He wouldn't elaborate.

The entrance to the one-story health center is about or 120 feet from a public sidewalk. The site also is across the street from Catholic Charities' Holy Family Food Pantry and community services office.

Shirley Caldwell Smith, president of Springfield Right to Life, said: "RU-486 (as mifepristone also is known) is known to be a dangerous drug, with which deaths have been attributed."

Undetected ectopic pregnancy is a risk associated with medication abortion, Smith said, though Planned Parenthood officials said this risk is rare.

"We urge Planned Parenthood to forgo providing this dangerous drug," Smith said. "As pro-lifers, we are opposed to any type of abortion," Smith said.

Planned Parenthood of Illinois posted annual revenues of \$24 million and a net loss of \$2.5 million in the fiscal year that ended June 30, Trombley said. The organization operates 19 health centers throughout the state, including facilities in Bloomington, Champaign, Decatur, Peoria and Pekin. Seven people work at the Springfield site.

Cost of medication abortions

Medication abortions at Springfield's Planned Parenthood clinic will cost \$350 to \$450.

To help Springfield-area clients afford the new service, a financial-assistance fund will be available through the agency. Trombley said 80 percent of clients who receive health-care and reproductive-health services at the Springfield center fall at or below the federal poverty line.

Most private insurance pays for abortion services. Illinois Medicaid pays for abortion only in cases of rape or incest or when the life or health of the mother is at risk.

Steve Trombley, president and chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood of Illinois, said the group doesn't make a profit on abortions because the agency provides so much financial assistance to clients.

"This is not a business proposition for us," he said, adding that more than 90 percent of Planned Parenthood's medical services are unrelated to abortion.

Abortion numbers

According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, between 300 and 350 Sangamon County residents get abortions each year. Public Health doesn't make data available for surrounding counties, but Steve Trombley, president and chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood of Illinois, speculated that 400 to 500 teens and women from the Springfield area leave the region for abortions each year.

He said Planned Parenthood doesn't know how many people might seek medication abortions once the Springfield service begins.

Illinois residents obtained 45,298 abortions in 2007, the most recent year for which statistics were available.

Girls as young as 12 can legally undergo abortions in Illinois without their parents' consent, but parents or guardians must be notified before girls 17 and younger obtain abortions. Girls can go to court to obtain waivers and avoid this notification.

Most people obtaining abortions from Planned Parenthood are ages 18 through 24.

How a medication abortion takes place

After a patient takes mifepristone, originally called RU-486, in a clinic setting, the drug blocks the hormone progesterone. This causes the lining of the uterus to break down and dislodges an implanted embryo.

A second medicine, misoprostol, is taken later, at home. This causes the uterus to empty and usually leads to cramps and heavy bleeding. The entire process usually is complete after 48 hours.

By contrast, surgical abortion takes place in a 10-minute procedure as part of a four-hour visit to a medical clinic or office.

Source: Planned Parenthood of Illinois

Effectiveness and safety

*Medication abortion fails to end a first-trimester pregnancy 2 percent to 3 percent of the time, compared with a failure rate of 0.5 percent for surgical abortion.

*Serious complications occur in one-half of 1 percent of medication abortions, and the death rate is one in 100,000. Since 2000, there have been reports of several deaths of women after

medication abortions, but Food and Drug Administration officials haven't been able to conclusively link those infection-related deaths to the medicines mifepristone or misoprostol.

*Serious complications connected with surgical abortions at 13 weeks of pregnancy or earlier take place less than one-half of 1 percent of the time. Death occurs in one in every 160,000 cases of surgical abortion.

*The risk of death of the mother associated with childbirth is more than 10 times the risk of death associated with abortion.

Sources: American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Guttmacher Institute and National Abortion Federation

More information

*Planned Parenthood: <http://tinyurl.com/abortionpill>

*U.S. Food and Drug Administration: <http://tinyurl.com/abortionpillsafetyinfo>.

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