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Planned Parenthood of the Heartland

Abortion provider's departure makes procedure harder to schedule in Nebraska

By Martha Stoddard / World-Herald bureau Jun 28, 2015

LINCOLN — Abortions have become harder to get in Nebraska since a longtime doctor retired.

The late-March departure of Dr. C.J. LaBenz left Planned Parenthood of the Heartland without a doctor to do abortions regularly at its Omaha and Lincoln clinics.

The organization responded by flying in a Massachusetts-based physician to provide the services on a part-time basis.

It also cut the number of days that its clinics offer abortions from a total of eight per month to five.

As a result, abortion appointments fill quickly, according to Angie Remington, a Planned Parenthood spokeswoman.

“It has been challenging to meet the need for abortion services at our Nebraska health centers,” she said. “We are booking out two weeks in advance.”

Remington said Planned Parenthood remains committed to offering the legal albeit controversial service in Nebraska.

But the situation illustrates a difficulty facing abortion clinics in much of the country: finding physicians qualified to do abortions and willing to brave the threats, harassment and legal battles that come with the job.

“It takes a really passionate, committed person to step into that role,” Remington said.

There are no official figures on the number of doctors doing abortions in the United States.

Statistics collected by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services show that six doctors performed a total of 2,270 abortions in the state last year. Of those, four doctors did fewer than 25 procedures each. One did between 25 and 1,000 procedures and one did more than 1,000.

Nationally, there is no shortage of abortion providers, said Vicki Saporta, president and CEO of the National Abortion Federation, a professional organization for abortion providers.

But those providers are distributed unevenly across the country, she said. They tend to be scarce outside major urban areas and are in especially short supply where state laws restrict abortion rights and where providers must deal with intimidation and threats. Saporta puts Nebraska in the latter category.

“Nebraska has been fairly hostile to abortion providers and to abortion care in many ways,” she said. She noted that the state was the first to ban abortions at 20 weeks and has banned the use of telemedicine for drug-induced abortions.

She also pointed to the 1991 fire that destroyed a barn, mobile home and 17 horses owned by Dr. LeRoy Carhart, who operates an abortion clinic in Bellevue — the only Nebraska abortion clinic besides the Planned Parenthood clinics in Omaha and Lincoln.

Carhart contended that the fire was arson, but a State Fire Marshal’s Office investigation could not determine the cause of the fire.

Carhart and other abortion providers in the state have faced protests and harassment at work, home and church. The protests have extended to family members and clinic staff.

Denny Hartford, leader of Omaha’s Vital Signs Ministries, has organized protests and prayer vigils at abortion clinics for many years. His group also does what it calls sidewalk counseling, in which anti-abortion activists attempt to persuade women entering abortion clinics to change their minds.

Hartford attributes the shortage of abortion providers in the state to the emotional toll that aborting fetuses takes on doctors.

“It’s very, very difficult to attract people to do this kind of work,” he said.

Julie Schmit-Albin, executive director of Nebraska Right to Life, pointed to the stigma that comes with being an abortion doctor as a key reason for the shortage. “What young medical student wants to jump into that?”

Remington and Saporta, however, expressed confidence that Planned Parenthood will be able to find a physician for its Nebraska clinics — eventually.

The organization has been advertising for a physician and an associate medical director for the Nebraska clinics for several years, Remington said.

LaBenz came out of retirement to fill the gap for a while. He had closed his own midtown Omaha clinic in 2006.

He declined to comment about the availability of providers or his decision to step down this spring. Carhart did not return messages seeking comment.

When LaBenz retired again this spring, Planned Parenthood temporarily suspended abortions at its Lincoln clinic and reduced their availability in Omaha.

The organization referred women seeking drug-induced abortions to its Council Bluffs clinic. Women needing surgical procedures were referred to the clinic in Des Moines, where Planned Parenthood of the Heartland is headquartered.

Remington said grant money helps cover the transportation costs for women who needed the assistance.

Now services are being provided at both clinics again by Dr. Nicola Moore, who comes to the state a few days per month. Dr. Jill Meadows, Planned Parenthood’s medical director, also picks up some appointments.

Saporta said so-called circuit-riders such as Moore are used in a number of places where it has been difficult to recruit a permanent provider.

Moore had a similar arrangement with the Omaha clinic before and has been a circuit provider at clinics in South Dakota, Iowa and Mississippi.

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