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Counter-Protesting at Abortion Clinics Is Actually Counterproductive

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Andrew Burton/Getty Images

Imagine walking up to your doctor's office and seeing large groups of people marching, singing, chanting, shouting, and making it hard to even find a way inside. That is exactly what's happening outside of the Planned Parenthood of New York City's (PPNYC) Margaret Sanger Center—and it's getting worse.

For years, we have had anti-choice protesters from a nearby church gathering outside this Manhattan health center every Saturday. And for years, the center's staff and its highly trained volunteer health center escorts like myself have developed a system that ensures our patients can continue to access PPNYC's high-quality health-care services with as little stress as possible.

Starting last year, a group decided to start counter-protesting outside our center. While we truly appreciate that these activists support us and reproductive rights, I believe counter-protesting outside our health centers is actually counterproductive in that it makes it more difficult for us to provide patients with health care in a calm environment.

At PPNYC, our number-one priority is ensuring safe access to our health centers and delivering high-quality services for our patients. At the end of the day, that's what matters. For every additional body standing outside, it is that much more difficult for our staff members and trained escorts to ensure a basic right to health care. Add to that chanting, singing, shouting, waving signs, media, and police presence and it becomes the site of a rally—not of routine and necessary medical services.

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As escorts, our focus is our patients. We have a strict non-engagement policy with the anti-choice protesters and do not speak to them or interact with them to the extent it is avoidable. Instead, we are keeping an eye out for folks trying to find the health center or who are stopped by protesters and in need of assistance. That can mean simply stepping in to ask them if they are looking for our health center or for the building address, which is often enough to give them a way out of an unwelcome interaction. The idea is to avoid antagonizing protesters, to keep the situation calm and get patients to their appointments without incident.

Counter-protesting, meanwhile, often leads to the two groups engaging with each other across our sidewalks and entry points. When there is a crowd of people outside a health center, patients can have a hard time deciphering who is supportive and who is trying to interfere with their access to care. On days when we have protesters but no counter-protesters, it is easier for patients to see the escorts in their smocks; our escorts can, in turn, see patients in need of assistance more quickly. We have less noise to contend with from both sides and can evaluate one-on-one interactions better.

The fact of the matter is that there are many things you may disagree with that are completely legal to do in public. We train our escorts to monitor protesters for any illegal activity and how to react at a level we think is not disruptive to the greater purpose at hand. More people outside making noise or drawing attention away from our trained escorts, who are watching for patients, means we may not see someone who needs our assistance. Or these patients may see the crowds and simply leave. It's no surprise that our "no show" rates for appointments go up on days when there are counter-protests, meaning our patients are not receiving their services, which are often time-sensitive. Our patients are not coming here to make a political statement; they are just trying to get the health-care services they need. These actions have direct consequences on the people we are trying to help most.

Counter-protests create a need for additional staffing, security, police officers, and volunteer escorts, and the added strain on those individuals is real. Counter-protests also lead to media and other photographers taking photos, including photos of our patients arriving and departing. Their privacy and comfort seem to be an afterthought.

As a co-chair of PPNYC's Health Center Escort Program, I also take the safety and comfort of the escorts who I schedule each week very seriously. Our staff, security, and health center escorts are vetted and trained to deal with the protesters at our health centers. They are our eyes and ears and provide careful reports every day that we have protester activity. Using the information, we react and adjust, adding an additional escort to shifts as needed or having more staff members doing checks outside to fit the needs of our patients on a week-to-week basis. I'm asking these folks to do something so critical for our patients and I want them to feel supported in that. The increase in disruptive demonstrations makes their work more difficult and causes undue stress.

I am an activist and a volunteer, but I am also a freelance worker who is often uninsured or underinsured. I am a patient who relies on Planned Parenthood as my reproductive health-care provider. I have had the experiences of encountering protesters from both of these perspectives.

If protesters stopped showing up, we would no longer have escorts. That's the way it should be. But we would still need to fight for reproductive justice, health care, and abortion rights at local, state and

national levels to ensure access. Donating money, showing up at rallies, speaking to your representatives, phone banking, and traveling to Albany with Planned Parenthood or similarly minded groups to speak directly with legislators about the importance of preserving access to health care—including enacting laws that would restrict the ability of anti-choice protesters to disrupt care in front of clinics—is huge. Even the act of sharing your story of why this is important to you can help someone else open up about their experience and can address the stigma around women’s health and reproductive services. Open dialogue goes a long way.

The change in the political climate has resulted in record numbers of people trying to do more and be active in ways they may not have been in the past. We are grateful for the support and encourage action and awareness. It seemed for a while that many people had taken things like access to health care for granted; they now clearly see what is at stake if we don’t stay vigilant. But that excitement and passion is not always channeled in the most effective ways.

There are many places where we must make sure our voices are heard—loudly and resoundingly—and we must show up and fight. Saturday morning at our health centers is just not one of them.

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