

NEW WHITEFISH CLINIC TO PROVIDE ABORTIONS

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From right, physician assistant Susan Cahill, family nurse practitioner Helen Weems and office manager Paige Rappleye at the All Families Healthcare office in Whitefish on Monday. (Brenda Ahearn/Daily Inter Lake)

A new primary-care medical clinic opening in Whitefish next month will offer sexual and reproductive health services, including abortions.

All Families Healthcare bears the same name as the health-care clinic operated by Kalispell physician assistant and longtime abortion provider Susan Cahill. Cahill's clinic, which had a clientele of 400 patients, was vandalized and destroyed four years ago by Zachary Klundt. He was sentenced to five years in prison and ordered to pay \$669,000 in restitution.

At the time of the destruction in March 2014, Cahill's clinic was the only one in Northwest Montana that conducted first-trimester abortions. She had been providing abortions in Kalispell for decades, having worked as a physician assistant since 1977.

Cahill closed her business following the destruction of her clinic. Since then a Missoula clinic has been the closest place in the region for abortion services.

Cahill now joins Helen Weems, a nurse practitioner who relocated to Whitefish two years ago from Seattle, in opening the new clinic at 737 Spokane Ave. The clinic will open Feb. 5.

"We are a family practice with emphasis on sexual and reproductive health," Weems said. "We're not trying to compete with [other clinics] but our goal is to fill some of the health-care gaps."

Those gaps include care for adolescents, transgender and women seeking abortions. All Families Healthcare will offer same-day access to all forms of reversible birth control, Weems said.

Weems worked for 13 years at Neighborcare Health, the largest provider of primary medical and dental care in Seattle for low-income and uninsured families and individuals.

She said she knew about Cahill's ordeal of having her clinic destroyed, and contacted her soon after relocating to Whitefish. Since closing her clinic Cahill has helped her husband with his business and is an independent contractor with Planned Parenthood for telemedicine services.

Weems said she's passionate about women being able to plan their pregnancies and have health-care services available to accomplish that goal.

"I reached out to Susan, and we had a few conversations," Weems said.

Cahill wasn't immediately sure she wanted to jump back into clinic work.

"I probably told her to leave me alone" when she first called, Cahill recalled. She wrestled with depression following the aftermath of clinic destruction and eventually found relief through yoga.

"It comes up periodically," Cahill said about the post-traumatic stress. "I loved my office and took a lot of care with it."

Weems persisted, and over dinner Cahill cut to the chase: "Do you know what you're getting into?"

Cahill's clinic had been a vocal target for anti-abortion advocates for years, with pro-life believers sometimes picketing outside her clinic. She began her work under Dr. James Armstrong, one of the first doctors to provide abortions in the area. In 1994 Armstrong's clinic was firebombed by a Washington man who had attacked several other facilities.

The destruction Klundt left in his wake is still fresh in her mind, how he destroyed the plumbing and heating system in the building and all of her medical equipment. He ripped apart and broke every glass object, stabbed knives into or punched hammer holes into photographs and put knife holes into the faces of her friends and family.

Weems acknowledges the controversy that accompanies health-care clinics that provide abortions.

"Realistically, I have fears," she said.

But Weems and Cahill found themselves on the same page, and of the same mindset that access to such health-care services has to outweigh the risk.

"Helen is the person I wanted to come [to the clinic] 15 years ago," Cahill said. "I felt it was important for me to continue Dr. Armstrong's legacy."

Cahill worked with Armstrong from 1977 until he retired in the early 2000s. She opened All Families Healthcare in Kalispell in 2007.

Cahill's intent is to mentor Weems for a couple of years and then hand the baton to other health-care professionals who would work at the clinic.

"The valley is changing. I'm sure she'll find one or two other people," Cahill said.

Montana law allows physician assistants — but not nurse practitioners — to perform abortions. In the mid-1990s the Montana Legislature passed a law restricting the performance of abortions to licensed physicians. At the time Cahill was the only physician assistant performing abortions in the state. She contested the law and won her case. The Montana Supreme Court upheld Cahill's constitutional right to provide abortions.

Weems received a \$100,000 grant from an agency that provides resources for abortion clinics to help get the Whitefish clinic up and running. She also got a grant that enables All Families Healthcare to pre-purchase birth control such as intrauterine devices to provide patients immediate access to contraception.

The clinic has partnered with the Montana Human Rights Network to set up a patient care access fund to which tax-deductible donations can be made.

For more information about All Families Healthcare, go online to www.allfamilieshealth.org, or call 406-730-8682.

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