

Former Planned Parenthood Employees Allege Mismanagement

In the wake of suspension of abortion services, clinic staffers say new management prioritized money over patients

BY STEVEN HALE — DEC 18, 2018 12 PM



The news came suddenly earlier this month, and with little explanation: Nashville's only remaining abortion clinic, the Planned Parenthood facility on Dr. DB Todd Jr. Boulevard in North Nashville, was suspending abortion services indefinitely. It's the second clinic to stop offering abortions this year, after The Women's Center closed in August.



PHOTO: JUDE FERRARA

Tereva Parham, a spokesperson for Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi, told reporters the health center was undergoing "a period of quality improvement" and said the organization had a shortage of abortion providers. Questions about what exactly "a period of quality improvement" meant were returned with what can best be described as word salad (e.g., "As soon as we're able to address the aspects of this quality improvement, we are looking to be able to provide those services, those specific services, as soon as possible"). When the *Scene* tried to follow up with Parham for this story, an automatic email response came back: "Be advised, Tereva Parham is no longer employed at Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi."

It turns out the news was just as sudden and relatively unexplained to the clinic's staff and patients. The *Scene* spoke to four staffers from the facility, some of whom have lost their jobs as a result of the closure, and all describe a turbulent six months leading up to the announcement. Some learned of the news by email, while others found out when they checked a work schedule and noticed their name no longer appeared on it.

The staffers also say a number of patients with upcoming appointments received a terse text message informing them that the appointment had been canceled. For women seeking elective abortions, the only option now is to make the long trek to one of several clinics that are all at least 100 miles away — in Memphis, Knoxville or Huntsville. And that's a trip they may well have to make twice, as laws in both Tennessee and Alabama require a 48-hour waiting period between a woman's first appointment and the abortion procedure.

The staffers, who spoke under the condition of anonymity due to fear of facing retaliation, say they don't believe it had to come to this. Some doctors and staff were willing to stay on providing abortion services, even if it was on a part-time basis, they say. The blunt, cold delivery of the news is in line with what they describe as a number of recent policy changes at the clinic that they perceived as being designed to prioritize money over patients.

Although Planned Parenthood is a nationally known brand and has in many ways come to represent one side of the political fight over abortion rights, it is an umbrella organization that supports individual affiliates across the country. The Nashville outpost was a part of Planned Parenthood of Middle and East Tennessee until six months ago, when it merged with Planned Parenthood Greater Memphis Region to form a new affiliate: Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi. The Nashville outpost's affiliate had been in dire financial straits, and at least at first, the clinic's staff saw the merger as a positive development — the Memphis organization was said to be one of the more financially stable affiliates in the country.

But the merger, which went into effect on June 1, kicked off a series of changes that Nashville staffers say interfered with their mission as they saw it. Among the new dictates, they highlight:

- A loan program, through which the clinic lent patients money to cover the cost of their first appointment, was canceled, with new leadership citing mismanagement of the program and low rates of repayment. Staffers say this led patients to delay their appointments to come up with money and thus, in some cases, have abortions later in their pregnancies — which can be riskier, more painful and more costly.
- Clinic staff was also prohibited from screening patients for a financial assistance program that offered a reduced rate for the abortion procedure. This dictate came, staffers say, despite the fact that the financial assistance came from a national fund that reimburses local clinics for the difference in cost.
- Staffers were instructed to begin charging patients for IV sedation, which had previously been included with the abortion procedure. As a result, they say, some women would wait longer to have the procedure or go without the medication.
- New management stopped providing doctors with sterile gloves and, staffers say, wanted to use small plastic drinking cups for urine samples.

"It felt like everything they did was money-motivated, not motivated by [concern for] the patient," one staffer tells the *Scene*.

With each new dictate from afar, the employees say, they could sense frustration among the doctors and weakening morale among the rest of the staff. Doctors and health care assistants started leaving. During one three-week stretch not long ago, three doctors left the clinic.

Increased patient loads led to wait times that could stretch to four or five hours. And some patients perceived policy changes — such as charging for IV sedation or offering less financial assistance — as moves aimed at discouraging them from having an abortion.

All of that, employees tell the *Scene*, was at odds with the mission they'd signed up for — helping often desperate women and trying to make a difficult situation easier whenever possible. Far from rushing women into an abortion, the staff members each describe a personal desire to make sure women knew all of their options, and could proceed with the one that was best for them as safely and comfortably — and with as much dignity — as possible. The clinic's new direction seemed increasingly at odds with that mission, but they stayed on.

"I didn't trust them to hire anyone who cared," one staff member says.

One staffer says that as late as 24 hours before the announcement that abortion services would be suspended, providers and assisting staff had agreed to keep the clinic open on a part-time basis. There was no explanation, they say, as to why that plan was scrapped.

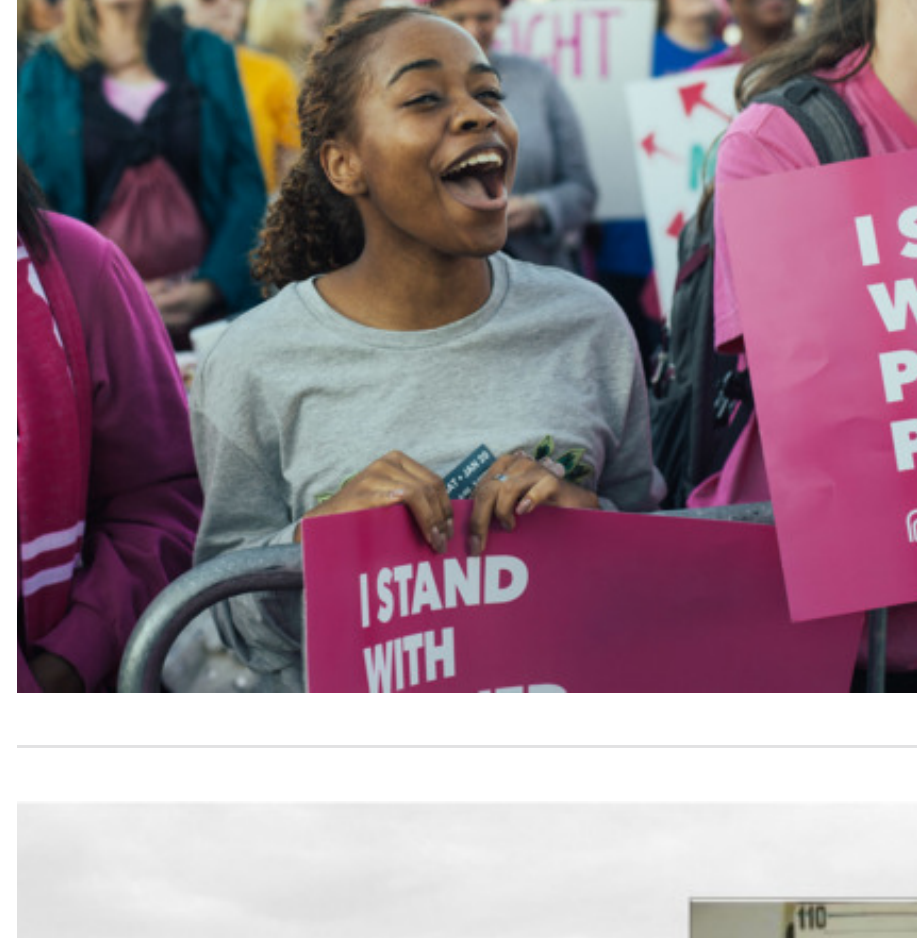
All who spoke to the *Scene* for this story say they struggled with whether to talk publicly about the clinic's past six months, fearing it would only fuel the rhetoric of anti-abortion activists. But ultimately, they say, a concern for their patients and a belief that this wasn't the way things had to go moved them to speak.

For now, other services — like birth control, testing for sexually-transmitted infections and wellness exams — are still available. There are reportedly plans to resume abortion services in mid-January.

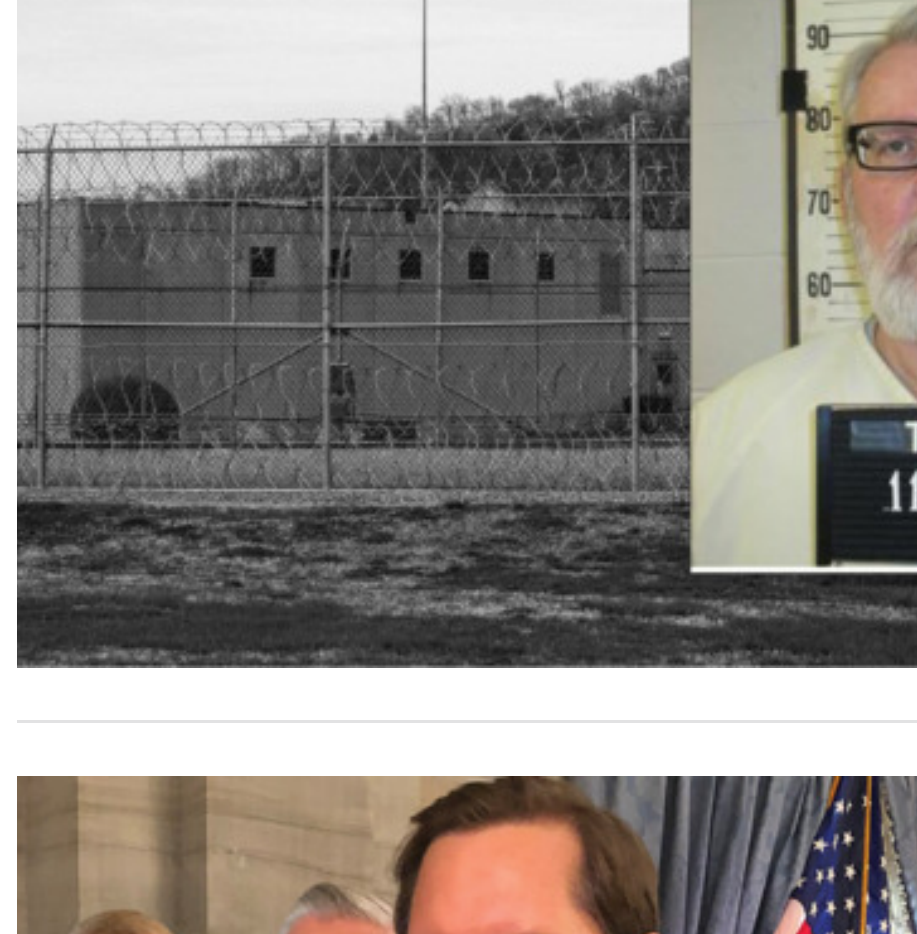
As for "quality improvement," some former staff members say they believe that's a euphemism for replacing employees who pushed back on troublesome policy changes with new ones who will be more compliant.

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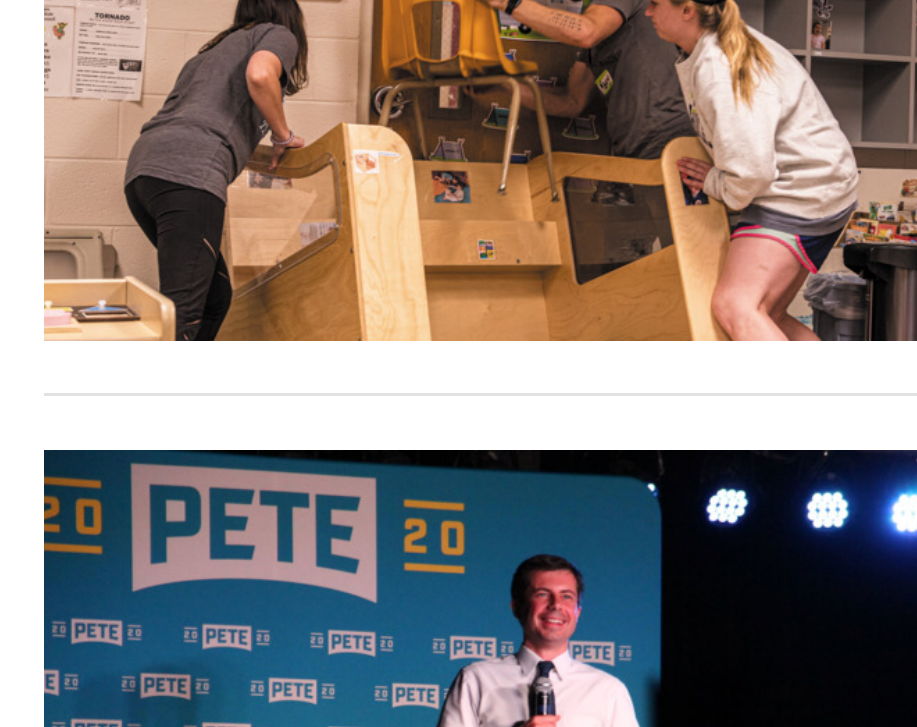
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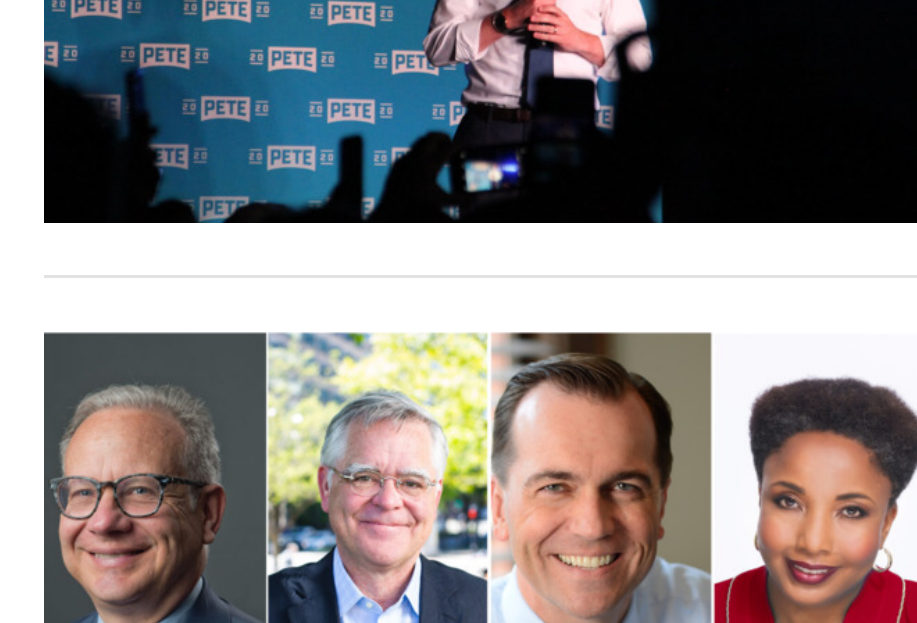
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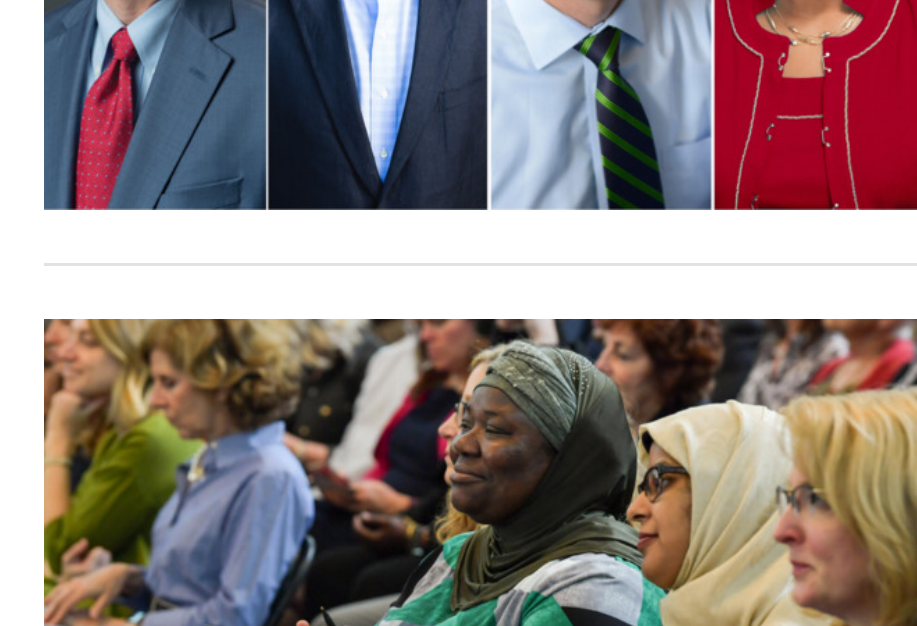
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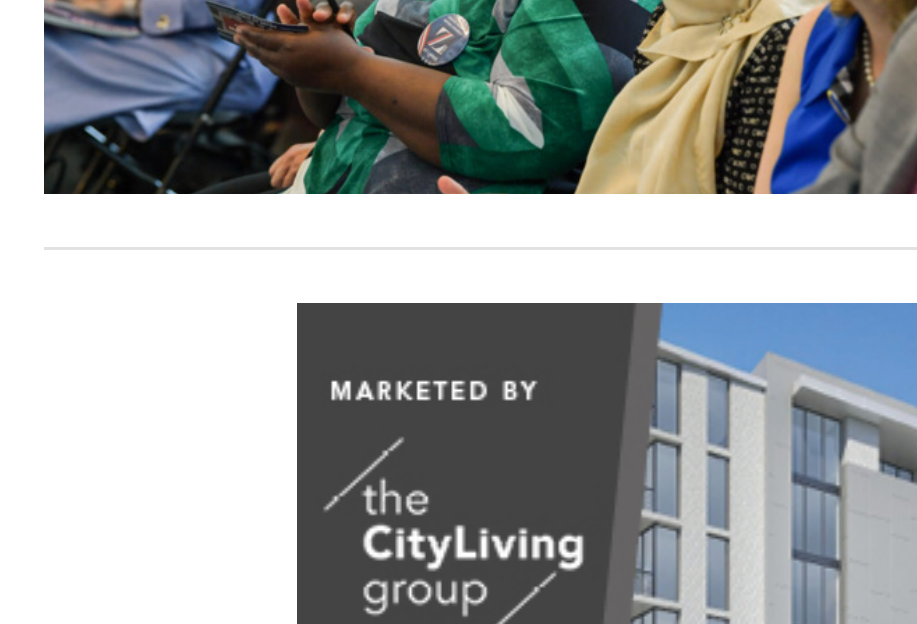
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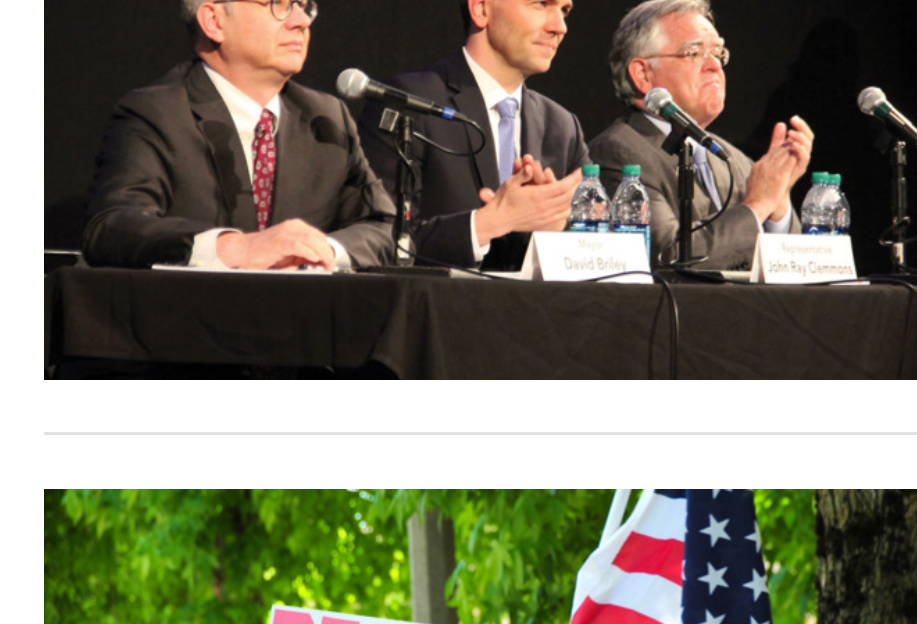
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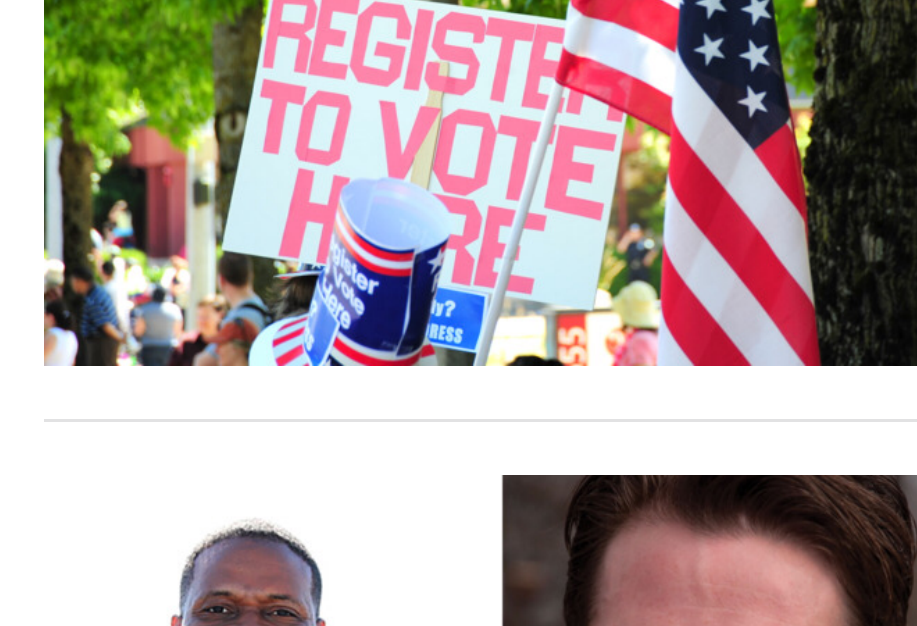
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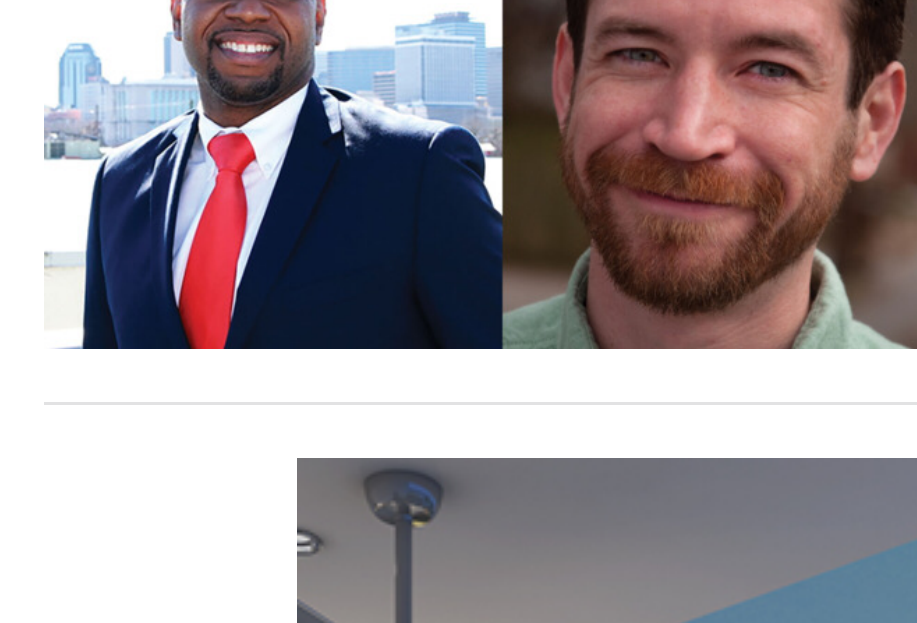
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