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Abortion clinics in S.C. face new fines

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NOV 11, 2015



COLUMBIA — South Carolina’s public health agency told lawmakers Thursday the state’s abortion providers face additional fines as part of inspections ordered by Gov. Nikki Haley after videos surfaced purporting to show Planned Parenthood employees discussing the harvesting and sale of fetal tissue.

Catherine Heigel, head of the Department of Health and Environmental Control, said the agency proposed fines ranging from \$2,200 to \$21,150 for the state’s three abortion clinics and two waste-disposal companies after DHEC found the clinics were violating state regulations. The cited violations include paperwork issues and fetuses being sterilized with steam and taken to a landfill, rather than incinerated as required by law.

Jenny Black, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood South Atlantic, said afterward that the organization had received a proposed consent order from DHEC on Nov. 6 and was given until Nov. 20 to respond but had not been informed of any possible fines.

“No monetary amount related to a penalty was mentioned in the proposed consent order,” she said. “We are still in conversation with DHEC to reach a final consent order.”

Planned Parenthood has previously called the investigations part of a national witch hunt by conservative Republicans.

Several Republican governors, including Haley, and Republican-controlled legislatures have ordered investigations of Planned Parenthood since an anti-abortion rights group released the videos earlier this year. In August, Haley asked DHEC to investigate whether abortion clinics in Charleston, Columbia and Greenville are complying with state laws.

State officials also are looking into whether Medicaid money is being used for abortions.

The investigations resulted in DHEC fining the clinics and suspending the licenses of the Greenville Women’s Clinic and the Columbia clinic operated by Planned Parenthood South Atlantic in September. The threat to shut them down unless they complied with state regulations was lifted after the clinics paid the fines and submitted plans for correcting violations and deficiencies.

Thursday’s House oversight committee hearing also focused on state agencies’ interactions with the clinics, including whether DHEC was adequately inspecting clinics and enforcing regulations.

Heigel told the committee that the agency found deficiencies in its inspections and enforcement and has taken steps to improve them.

“We’re better equipped from the practice of how the inspections are done,” she said. “We’ve identified some areas where we think the regulations can be enhanced or improved to give us better information to fulfill our statutory charge.”

Heigel, who took the DHEC’s helm in June, said Thursday the agency has better trained staff and changed how inspections are conducted, including joint inspections by the agency’s infectious waste and health divisions.

Rep. Donna Hicks, R-Boiling Springs, who questioned state agencies’ diligence in overseeing the clinics, was ill and did not attend the hearing.

Committee Chairman Gary Clary, R-Clemson, said other than the issues with DHEC’s inspection practices, the hearings have mostly been informational.

“DHEC had deficiencies in their inspections, but they’re working to tighten up the ship,” he said. “Other agencies mostly just cleared up questions that we had.”

Corrections Director Bryan Stirling was called to testify Thursday after Hicks circulated a photo showing a Department of Corrections van in front of a Planned Parenthood clinic and two guards escorting an inmate inside.

“I can’t discuss the specifics of what happened during the visit (due to privacy laws) ... but I can say that this baby was born three weeks ago,” Stirling said, adding that when inmates decide to have an abortion — or any other outside medical care — they must pay for it.

Contacted by phone, Hicks said it was “good to know” that the state had not paid for an abortion for the inmate.

Rep. James Smith, D-Columbia, who has been a vocal opponent of the investigation, said he was not surprised that the committee had not found a smoking gun condemning Planned Parenthood or other abortion clinics.

“What’s been shown (through the investigation) is that these agencies worked with regulatory entities to make sure the law is followed,” he said. “There are no criminals and no crimes committed as was alleged.”

The committee plans to meet Dec. 1 for what Clary said he hopes is its final meeting to discuss any possible recommendations for the full Legislative Oversight Committee.

“It could be legislation, it’s up to the will of the committee,” he said. “It’s possible that there are no recommendations.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Reach Maya T. Prabhu at (843) 509-8933.