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NEW YORK

# City to launch program to escort patients at heavily protested abortion clinics

By ERIN DURKIN  
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"Dangerous rhetoric and disturbing protests outside reproductive health clinics have become increasingly divisive and disruptive to families who are trying to get health care," Council Speaker Christine Quinn said. (Nicholas Fevelo for New York Daily News)

A new City Council-backed escort program to aid patients at heavily protested city abortion clinics will launch next month, [Speaker Christine Quinn](#) announced Friday.

The move to recruit and train escorts comes in response to growing protests by anti-abortion activists, officials said.

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"Dangerous rhetoric and disturbing protests outside reproductive health clinics have become increasingly divisive and disruptive to families who are trying to get health care," Quinn said. "If you can't get in the building where the health care is being offered, you do not actually have access to that health care."

The Daily News reported that a Sunset Park, Brooklyn abortion clinic shut down last month after owners said protesters drove away patients and doctors. And a major anti-abortion vigil is planned Saturday at Choices Women's Medical Center in Jamaica, Queens.

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Choices Women's Medical Center president Merle Hoffman calls anti-abortion activists American Taliban. (Jeanne Noonan/for New York Daily News)

Pols and advocates showed video of protesters at Choices surrounding a woman trying to enter the clinic against a wall, until she eventually left without going inside. They said the anti-abortion activists often wave posters with pictures of Nazi gas chambers and lynchings in the South, and taunt African American patients with accusations they are committing "black genocide."

"Women in this city have to run a vicious gauntlet through what are called demonstrators, protesters. I call them bullies and the American Taliban," said Choices president Merle Hoffman.

Quinn said she disagreed with the Taliban reference, but said the escorts are needed to shield women from protesters who violate laws barring them from following or harassing people within 15 feet of a clinic.

"People have every constitutional, first amendment right to protest in front of any medical facility or any other facility they want...What they don't have a right to do is break the law," she said.

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Msgr. Philip Reilly, who leads protests at Brooklyn and Queens clinics, said city government shouldn't be taking sides in the divisive abortion fight.

"Aren't they supposed to represent both sides and take a neutral position?" he said. "The City Council should not be involved in that type of thing. They're my representatives too, and this is taking a side."

He said the protests are non-threatening. "Nobody's ever stopped

going into a clinic. We're very peaceful and prayerful," he said. "Anyone who is offering a mother help, they do it very peacefully."

The escorts from the City Council Clinic Protection Program will hit the streets Saturdays starting Nov. 1. No taxpayer money will be spent on the effort because it is all volunteer, Quinn said.

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**Erin Durkin**



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Erin Durkin is a reporter in the Daily News City Hall bureau, covering city government and politics, the de Blasio administration and the City Council. She previously covered urban development and local issues in the paper's Brooklyn bureau.

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