

http://www.themonitor.com/news/local/article_515e4a2a-f4da-11e2-bdec-0019bb30f31a.html

Doctor estimates Harlingen abortion clinic to close within next 3 months

Jacqueline Armendariz | The Monitor Follow @jarmendariz Jul 24, 2013

McALLEN — The owner of the Harlingen abortion clinic said it will soon close due to a provision in the controversial Texas law that requires that doctors have admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles.

Lester Minto, the family practice doctor who operates Reproductive Services of Harlingen clinic at 613 W. Sesame Drive, said he will not be able to meet the mandate. To be clear, the new law won't take effect until about three months — 91 days to be exact — after the last day of the ongoing second special session of the Legislature.

"The devil is in the details in this bill," said Minto, 64.

The strict new operating standards in the bill that are expected to shut down the majority of the state's abortion clinics don't take effect until September 2014.

There are two abortion providers in the Rio Grande Valley: one in Harlingen and the other in McAllen at the Whole Woman's Health clinic at 802 S. Main St.

Kristeena Banda, administrator of the McAllen clinic, said the facility here is still open. A Whole Woman's Health spokeswoman did not return request for comment for further details by press time Wednesday.

Under the section of law requiring admitting privileges, a doctor is guilty of a Class A misdemeanor punishable by a fine of no more than \$4,000 if they violate the provision.

The two hospitals where Minto might apply for admitting privileges, one in Harlingen and one in Brownsville, operate under Valley Baptist Health System — a system with religious affiliation. Minto said he does not anticipate being granted admitting privileges there for that reason. He said doing so might also jeopardize the funding for the hospital.

“Unfortunately, we have turned women’s reproductive rights into a religious issue,” he said, adding he believes the separation of church and state is not being upheld under the new law.

Minto said he might consider trying to obtain privileges in Matamoros, Mexico — about 30 miles away — if that would allow him to continue providing abortions.

He said his facility hasn’t seen an uptick in women seeking an abortion knowing time is short before the clinics close. Instead, he said more people have called to check if the clinic is still open.

The doctor said the controversy in Texas has led to a Monday interview with the Huffington Post and a recent interview with *Newsweek*, and on Friday the worldwide TV network Al Jazeera is set to film in his clinic.

Roland Flores, a 14-year-old with the Holy Family Catholic Church Youth Group, said his organization is working with Pro-Life Brownsville to raise money to open a pregnancy clinic in Brownsville.

They are also planning a January protest at the federal courthouse there, he said, “just to ensure the abortion doesn’t re-enter the Valley.”

“Thank God,” Flores initially responded when asked about the Harlingen clinic’s closure. “I love women’s health. ... When it comes to killing another, it’s wrong. It can never be right for a woman to say, ‘No, I can’t have this baby.’”

Justine Torres, a 14-year-old with the Pro-Life Brownsville, said she believes abortion is killing, a choice that only God can make.

Flores, who said birth control should be an option, thanked all involved in the debate in the state’s Capitol, including pro-choice protestors for “standing up for what they believe in.”

Minto said though some claim it's the money that drives abortion providers, his clinic only breaks even on a yearly basis. Meanwhile, he said the real issue — a lack of access to birth control here — is ignored.

A recent study from the University of Texas at Austin found that particularly because many Valley women have low income, there is a significant lack of access to reproductive health services.

“But people don't address that. They attack us, the healthcare providers,” he said, adding that abstinence is an unreliable option. “It's all human nature. It's our goal to spread our genetic material. ... No one's going to stop. It's like stopping eating.”

The doctor said he hopes the courts will overturn the new law, but for now he continues to support a woman's right to choose. He added that if there are laws to regulate women's reproduction, there should be the same for men.

“I can't tell you how I will go underground, but somehow I will be there,” he said.

jarmendariz@themonitor.com

Jacqueline Armendariz