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The Coronavirus Crisis

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In Texas, Oklahoma, Women Turned Away Because Of Coronavirus Abortion Bans

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Heard on Morning Edition



SARAH MCCAMMON

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Updated at 5:22 a.m. ET Friday

The doors at the Trust Women clinic in Oklahoma City were locked on Tuesday, when the young woman arrived for her appointment. Over the phone, a clinic worker told her the news – the facility had to shut down because of an order from Gov. Kevin Stitt banning most abortions.

"And immediately I just, like, broke down," she said. "I just lost my job because of the coronavirus. I already have a 10-month-old daughter. I don't know what I'm gonna do, you know?"

"M" asked us not use her full name because she's concerned about how her family would react to her seeking an abortion. She's 30, with two kids. She said she lost her job in the retail industry a couple of weeks ago after business suddenly vanished.

"M" said she was able to get an appointment for the next day at a clinic in Wichita, Kan. She doesn't have a reliable car, so a friend drove her there – a two-and-a-half-hour trip each way.

"There were so many people there from so many different states, and I only think about how many couldn't make it," she said.

Republican officials in several states are trying to ban abortion during the coronavirus crisis. They say the procedure should be suspended during the pandemic, except for emergencies, to help preserve medical supplies like surgical masks and hospital gowns.

Federal courts have blocked such orders in Ohio and Alabama. Officials in Iowa agreed to allow doctors to determine when an abortion is needed. A federal court briefly blocked a ban in Texas, before that decision was overturned on appeal. Litigation is ongoing.

Reproductive rights groups say hundreds of patients have been turned away in Texas, and in Oklahoma.

Becca Walker, a counselor at Southwestern Women's Surgery Center in Dallas, said many patients "panic" when they hear the news that their procedures are being cancelled. She said some patients are particularly afraid of being pregnant during a pandemic.

"Sometimes you're just guiding them through breathing on the phone because it's such a moment of panic and crisis for them," Walker said. "And then you just have to give them the referral, and the next referral is not good news."

Walker has been referring patients to clinics in New Mexico or Kansas, if they can make the trip.

Abortion rights opponents argue the bans are necessary and appropriate during a pandemic.

"We are setting aside all kinds of what would otherwise be considered essential healthcare – I would say more essential healthcare than abortion, certainly – cancer screenings," said Dr. Christina Francis, an OB/GYN in Indiana and board chair at the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians & Gynecologists.

"Abortion is not essential healthcare; it doesn't treat a disease process," Francis said.

"It's a social solution, and there are other solutions that we can provide to women who find themselves in very scary and uncertain circumstances right now."

Many doctors say denying an abortion can put patients at risk. The American Medical Association released a statement accusing some elected officials of "exploiting this moment," and saying the decision should be left to patients and doctors.

A physician with the Dallas clinic told NPR that some patients who've been turned away there have threatened to harm themselves.

Dr. Bhavik Kumar, who provides abortion services at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Houston, said in the midst of a pandemic, many patients seeking abortions feel desperate enough to consider dangerous home remedies.

"The scary part is a lot of my patients are asking us what they can do themselves, how they can use things at home, different herbs or vitamins or objects to help them not be pregnant," Kumar said. "They are scared."

Legal challenges are ongoing in several states where officials have tried to prohibit abortion during the coronavirus pandemic. A hearing on Oklahoma's ban is scheduled for Friday afternoon in federal court in Oklahoma City, and the issue could make its way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

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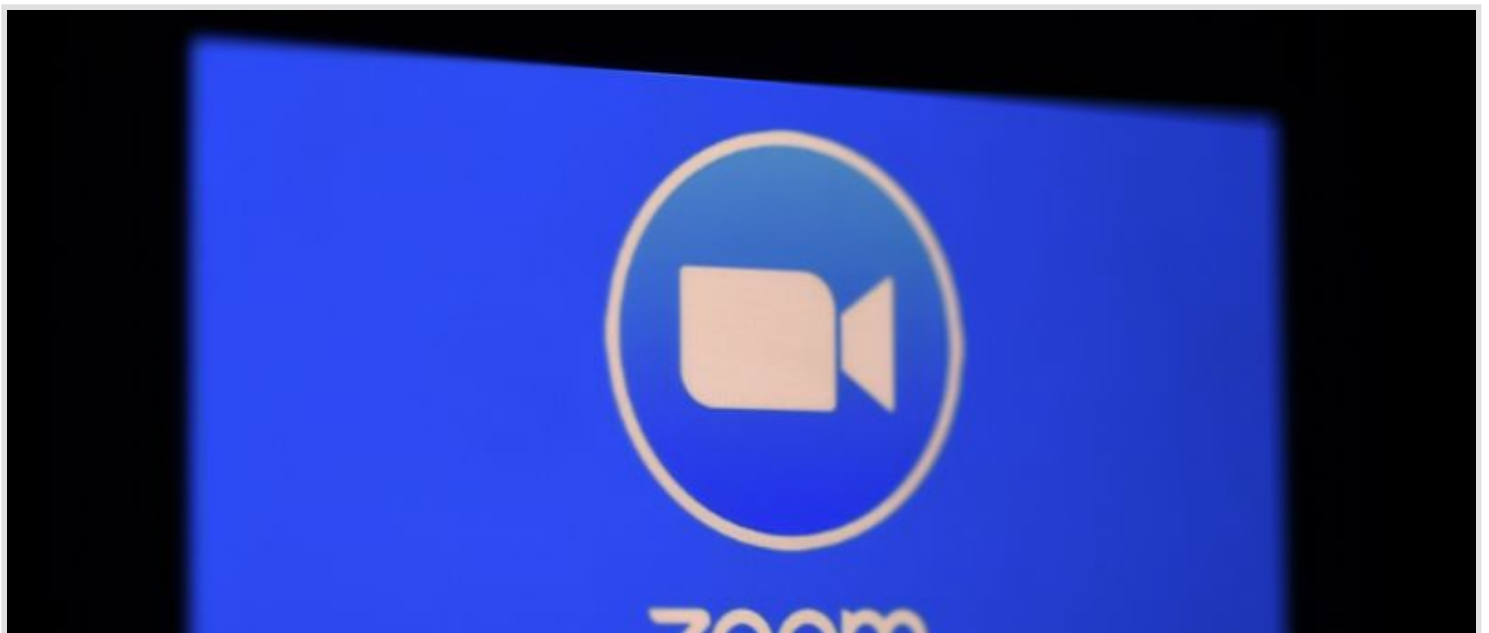
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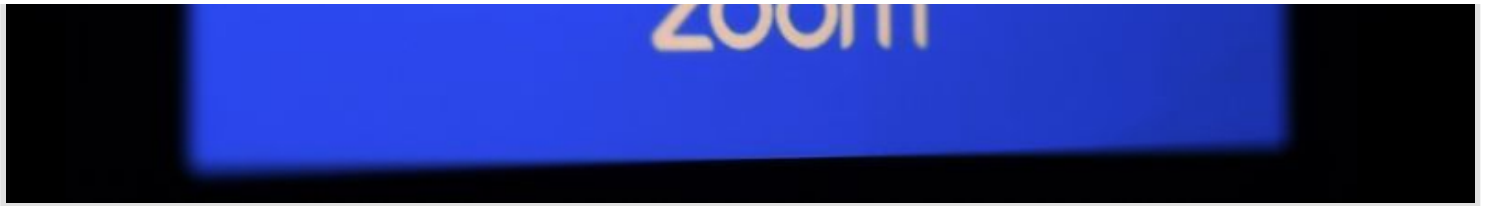
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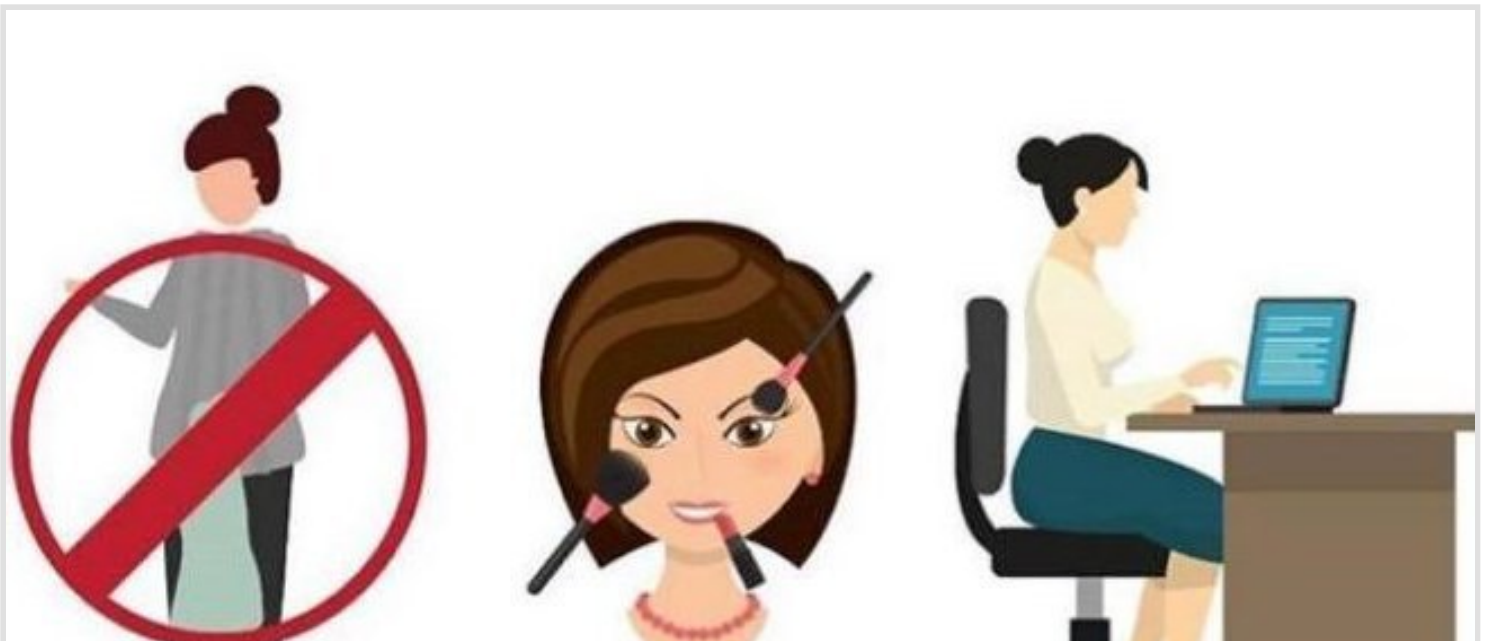
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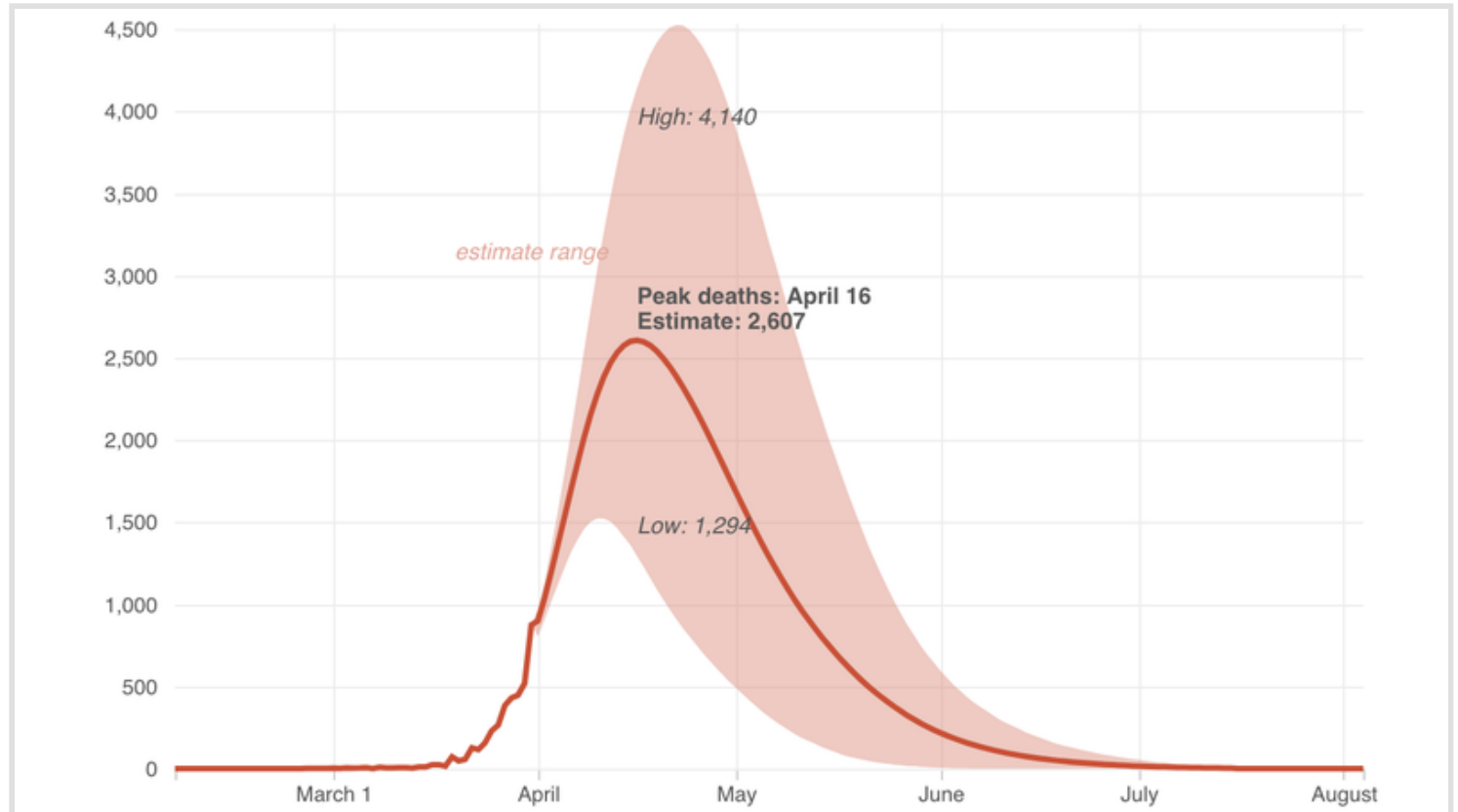
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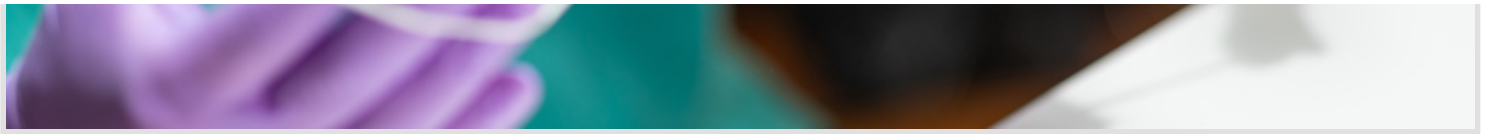
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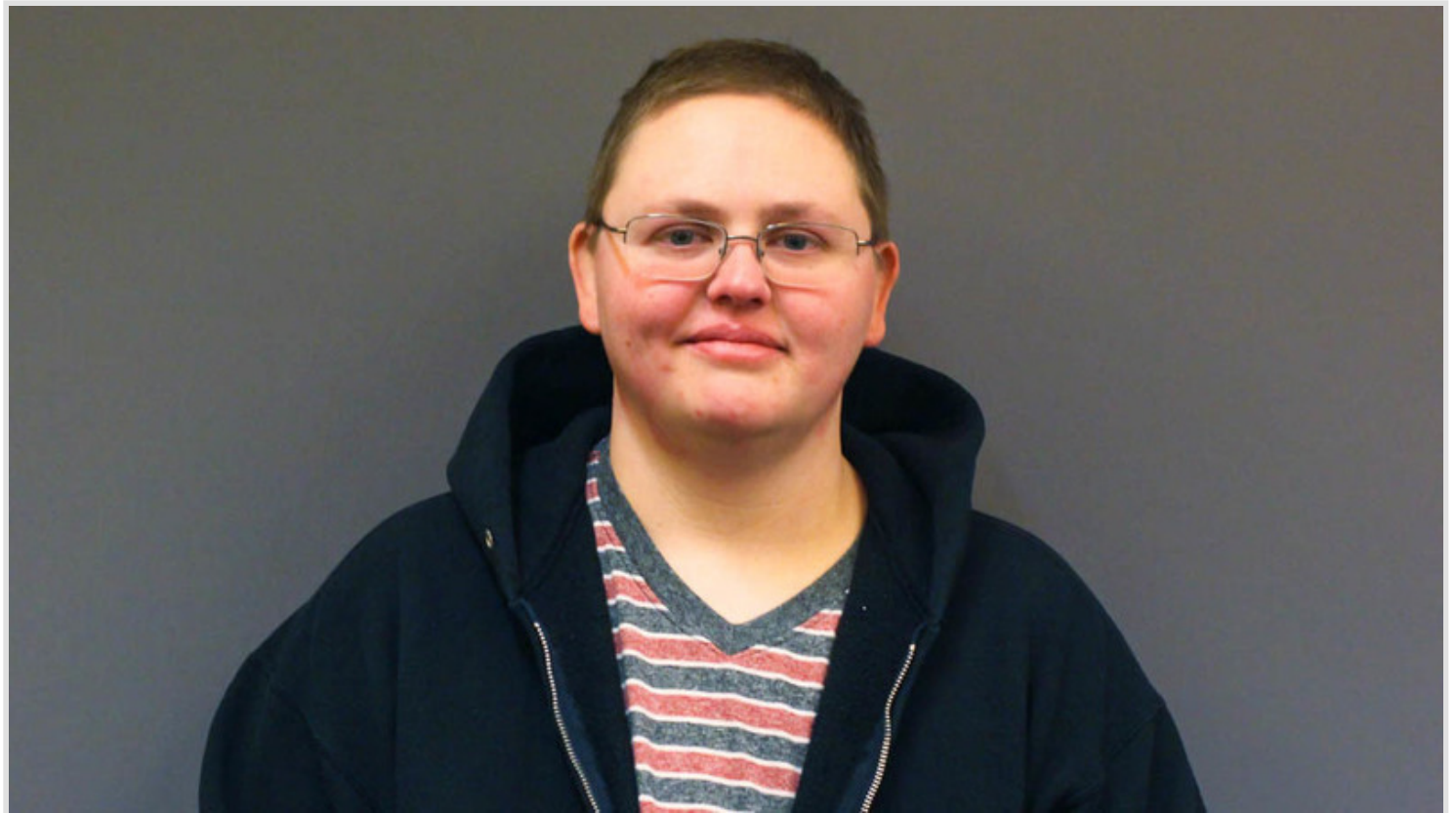
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