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Sunset Park clinic will no longer offer abortions, instead only outpatient surgical care

By MARK MORALES
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Msgr Philip J. Reilly, executive director of Helpers Of God's Precious Infants, (left), and Father Kevin Sweeney at the Ambulatory Surgery Center of Brooklyn.(Todd Maisel/New York Daily News)

A Sunset Park abortion clinic has shut down after Catholic protesters drove away doctors and patients, according to the owner of the clinic.

The Ambulatory Specialty Surgery Center of Brooklyn on 43rd St., closed earlier this month and will reopen in October as a new medical center providing outpatient surgeries, but not abortion.

Catholic leaders claimed the clinic's closure after 22 years as a victory for their anti-abortion effort. Abortion advocates said they had never heard of a clinic in the city closing under pressure from protesters.

"It was getting more and more difficult. Doctors were getting harassed and patients were getting harassed," said building and clinic owner Terry Lazar about his decision to eliminate abortions. "It was a decision we finally had to make."

Lazar said the clinic tried to provide both abortions and other types of procedures, but doctors and patients refused to cross the throngs of religious protesters who tried to convince them not to go in.

"You had protesters with signs and banners yelling at people telling them they were baby killers," Lazar said. "We were trying to do both and it just wasn't working. We would have gone out of business."

The new clinic - slated to open as the New York Center for Specialty Surgery under the direction of a California-based medical firm - is undergoing renovations.

So far as many as 20 doctors have expressed interest in working at the new clinic - a stark difference from as recently as a month ago when Lazar struggled to find doctors willing to work there.

Monsignor Philip Reilly - leader of the group the Helpers of God's Precious Infants - said he has gone to the center every week since it first opened to protest the abortions.

Reilly said both he and local Catholics were so happy, a celebration mass was held on Saturday at St. Michael's Church on the same block as the clinic.

"It's a complete victory," said Reilly. "The people who are doing it have evolved and their hearts have changed."

Lazar said he remained in favor of abortion, and had made the decision to shut the clinic only after Reilly and other protesters drove doctors and patients away.

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Julie Kirshner, president of the Brooklyn and Queens chapter of the National Organization for Women, said she was shocked abortions were no longer offered at the medical center.

"It's really a shame. I feel very badly and I'm disappointed about it," said Kirshner. "This means that women will have to be inconvenienced to get their health care. If [the clinic on 43rd St.] closed down, this could mean future closings and that's very disappointing."

with Lore Croghan

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