

Protesters line up outside new Planned Parenthood clinic in Waukegan

By EMILY K. COLEMAN
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Protesters line Lewis Avenue Friday afternoon outside the new Planned Parenthood clinic in Waukegan. Organizers said the event drew about 400 protesters, primarily from the greater Waukegan area but also from across northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. (Matt Yonke / HANDOUT)

Scores of protesters wearing masks lined Lewis Avenue for several blocks in what one organizer described as a “historic-level protest” against the new Planned Parenthood clinic in Waukegan.

The Friday afternoon protest came a week and a half after Planned Parenthood of Illinois [opened the clinic](#), which offers abortion services in addition to other birth control assistance, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, hormone therapy, and cervical and breast cancer screenings.

“The central message is Planned Parenthood is a bad neighbor, that Planned Parenthood is bad for Waukegan,” said Eric Scheidler, the executive director of the Pro-Life Action League, which organized the protest along with several Lake County-based anti-abortion groups.

Waukegan residents never got the chance to say whether they wanted a Planned Parenthood clinic in their community, said Scheidler, who criticized Planned Parenthood’s use of separate corporations to purchase properties and apply for city permits.

“Lake County is the third-largest county in Illinois, which up to this time had no abortion clinics,” Lake County Right to Life President Bonnie Quirke said in a news release. “Planned Parenthood needs to know that Lake County will continue to mobilize all aspects of the right to life movement to oppose their efforts, because societal problems are never solved by killing.”



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Planned Parenthood is “preying upon the economic and social concerns” created by COVID-19 pandemic and disproportionately targeting minority communities, Scheidler said.

“Abortion rates are going up,” he said. “That’s what we’d expect when there’s more uncertainty about the future. We know that many couples, many women concerned about the lower employment, fewer hours, losing their jobs, worries about health, they might turn to abortion, people who might not have otherwise.”

Planned Parenthood of Illinois opened the health center in Waukegan because of the “significant unmet need for affordable, high quality reproductive health care across Lake County,” President and CEO Jennifer Welch said in a statement Friday.

She pointed to 2018 data that shows Lake County has the fifth-highest uninsured rate in Illinois and said the county has a considerable need for education and resources about sexually transmitted infections, citing the area’s rising rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea.

Scheidler credited the huge turnout at Friday’s protest – a city official put attendance around at least 80 and Scheidler said he thinks it reached about 400 – in part with “the outrage of Planned Parenthood once again lying their way into a community” despite the challenges that the ongoing pandemic raised.

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Organizers marked X’s on the ground so that protesters would know how far apart to stand from one another and provided masks to those who didn’t bring their own, he said. Portions of the event were also streamed live on Facebook, including a closing prayer.

Scheidler said he thinks the online engagement may spread their message even further than a protest normally would, and he thinks some of the turnout might be the result of people wanting to get out and do something constructive during the pandemic.

Waukegan Mayor Sam Cunningham said the city was unaware that Planned Parenthood was the organization behind the applications to build a medical office at the former Norstates Bank location.

Ald. Edith Newsome, who represents the 5th Ward where the new clinic is located, said during Monday evening’s Waukegan City Council meeting that she was also unaware. She said when she saw construction at the site last fall, she asked city staff and was told it was going to be doctors’ offices.

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“I think when you have any business that comes in that could potentially bring controversy, it would be good to know,” Cunningham said, adding that like other health care providers, Planned Parenthood provides services Waukegan residents need. “But would I have wanted to know? It would have been great to have had a heads up.”

The city treated the project like “any other business application,” Cunningham said.

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Medical offices are an allowed use for the location, which means Planned Parenthood did not have to go through the city's planning and zoning process, said Noelle Kischer-Lepper, the city's director of planning and economic development.

"We don't use our personal values" in assessing business applications, Kischer-Lepper said. "There aren't regulations that would have prohibited this use. We don't judge based on the name of the business. We don't judge based on demographics or any other factors. That keeps it fair and equal."

Planned Parenthood of Illinois is forced to take these steps given "the unrelenting wave of attacks on reproductive health care and rights today," Welch said.

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"We have learned from past experiences that opponents of Planned Parenthood will do whatever they can to slow or stop construction of new health centers, including applying immense public pressure to local contractors and vendors who are working with us," Welch said. "This makes it difficult to provide the health care services that people need and deserve."

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