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ALERT TOP STORY

Tensions rise as 'sidewalk advocates' station themselves near Casper abortion clinic

Maya Shimizu Harris

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The outside of the True Care Women's Resource Center is seen on July 19 in Casper.
Madeline Carter file, Star-Tribune

Maya Shimizu Harris

The presence of anti-abortion “sidewalk advocates” at Casper’s new abortion clinic has led to increased tensions between the clinic and a local crisis pregnancy center that pushes abortion alternatives.

Volunteers with Sidewalk Advocates for Life, a “Christ-centered” national organization that aims to end abortion, have stationed themselves at the Wellspring Health Access abortion clinic on Second Street in Casper since June 1 — the same day True Care Women’s Resource Center, a nonprofit that aims to persuade pregnant women to seek abortion alternatives, opened its second location about two blocks down the street.



Group that pushes abortion alternatives opens site near Casper abortion clinic

Maya Shimizu Harris

Since then, Casper police have received two calls — one on June 1 and another on June 8 — regarding complaints that the sidewalk advocates were blocking the alley next to the abortion clinic and barring patients from entering the facility. True Care CEO Jessica Baxter said police came to the scene and that both situations were peacefully resolved.

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A spokesperson with the Casper Police Department confirmed this was the case for the June 8 incident. The Star-Tribune wasn't able to confirm with the Casper police by deadline if this was also the case with the other call.



Casper pregnancy center operations won't change under Wyoming's abortion ban

Ellen Gerst

Wellspring staff also emailed Casper police after a patient reported to them on June 8 that she and her partner had been held against their will at the True Care facility, Wellspring spokesperson Lauren Rankin told the Star-Tribune on Tuesday.

Though Sidewalk Advocates for Life spokesperson Elisabeth Beall and True Care CEO Jessica Baxter confirmed that a patient did go to the Second Street True Care facility on June 8 after meeting sidewalk volunteers at the Wellspring clinic, their accounts of what happened with the patient differ from that of Wellspring's, and they deny that the patient was held at the center against her will.

Casper police Sgt. Seth Wheeler told the Star-Tribune on Wednesday that there is no open investigation into the matter because the patient in question had not directly made a report to Casper police. He said police had asked Wellspring to request the patient contact the department, but the patient hadn't done so.



Demonstrators gather in Casper after Roe's reversal

Maya Shimizu Harris , Ellen Gerst

“Until this escalation with True Care, as far as we knew, we had no issue with them,” Rankin said of the crisis pregnancy organization.

When asked if True Care might try to communicate directly with Wellspring given the proximity of their facilities and recent conflicts, Baxter said her organization “would probably not consider them an appropriate partner or an appropriate connection for us.”

“We would not have any future plans of connecting with them, because they’ve made it kind of clear that they don’t really want anything to do with us.”



Safety still a concern as Casper abortion clinic begins to see patients

Aedan Hannon

The patient who visited the Second Street True Care location on June 8 is the only person so far who went to the center after being referred by sidewalk volunteers at the Wellspring clinic, according to Baxter. She said the patient left the facility before having an appointment.

Baxter said about 25 Sidewalk Advocates for Life volunteers have been trained so far. There are typically between two and six volunteers stationed at the abortion clinic at a time. They offer patients going to the Wellspring clinic a “gift bag” with information about True Care’s services and items like body lotion and bath bombs.

Baxter was listed as the local program leader on the group’s website when a Star-Tribune reporter last checked on Wednesday. Her True Care email was included as a contact. (Only Baxter’s first name was included, but Baxter confirmed with a Star-Tribune reporter on Thursday that she was the listed contact.) On Thursday the program leader for Casper had been changed to a different person with a Sidewalk Advocates email.



Judge rules secretary of state, lawmakers can't participate in abortion ban case

Maya Shimizu Harris

Sidewalk Advocates for Life has volunteers in dozens of communities across the nation, according to a **map on the group's website**. The organization's only presence in Wyoming so far is in Casper.

The True Care Women's Resource Center has been in Casper for more than 30 years, and it became a licensed medical clinic roughly a decade ago, according to its website.

The center offers free pregnancy testing, ultrasounds and STI/STD testing and treatment. The center doesn't provide or refer patients for abortions, although it does include some information about abortions on its website.



A sweeping abortion bill could expand legislative power in Wyoming

Maya Shimizu Harris

Baxter, True Care's CEO, spoke about the impact of deterring women from accessing the Wellspring abortion clinic, which she said could put the clinic "out of business," in a May Pregnancy Help New article written by the patient resources director of True Care Giving, the center's fundraising arm.

When asked about her statements in the article, and if True Care aims to close the Wellspring clinic, Baxter said the pregnancy center's ultimate hope is that "women will seek all the information that they need."

"I think that most of what women need can be provided by a place like True Care and local physicians," Baxter said, adding that Wyoming has "stated very clearly" in the Legislature that "we are a state that values life."

The Wellspring Health Access clinic opened its doors in April nearly a year after an arson destroyed most of the building's interior. It offers abortion and family planning services as well as gynecological and gender-affirming care.

Wellspring Health Access, which is led by founder and president Julie Burkhart, is one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit challenging two of Wyoming's abortion bans.

For now, abortion until viability remains legal in the state. A trial for the abortion lawsuit is scheduled for April 15 of next year.

Star-Tribune writer Sofia Saric contributed to this report.

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