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## Planned Parenthood will expand services with new center



Edward A. Ornelas, San Antonio Express-News

Jeffrey Hons, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of South Texas, (left) and Pat Smothers, Capital Campaign Chair, tour the new Planned Parenthood building that is under construction Saturday Oct. 11, 2014.

**By Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje**

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SAN ANTONIO — Last year, legislators approved a far-reaching change in abortion law that made it more difficult and costly for abortion clinics to provide services to women in Texas, resulting in more than 30 clinics closing throughout the state.

But at least one new facility is scheduled to open by the end of the year at 2140 Babcock Road — the location of Planned Parenthood South Texas' new ambulatory surgical center.

An existing 22,000-square-foot building near the heart of the Medical Center, its two stories are in the midst of a major renovation made possible by donations that poured in from across the nation, one Planned Parenthood board member said.

Not only will the \$6.5 million project allow the local affiliate to continue performing abortions under the new law, it will enable the nonprofit to expand the volume and type of services it can provide to include an array of gynecological care, such as day surgeries for uterine polyps and tubal ligations.



“This building is the physical expression of our commitment to the health and safety of women, and our respect for their ability to make decisions about their own lives,” said CEO Jeffrey Hons. “If the governor or anyone else thought we were going to close our doors, well, they were wrong.”

The new restrictions — part of so-called House Bill 2 — require that abortion clinics adhere to stricter, hospital-style surgical standards, even though some experts have said such regulations are medically unnecessary. The law also bans abortions after 20 weeks, regulates the use of the abortion pill and requires doctors to have admitting privileges at a nearby hospital — also unnecessary, critics said.

The federal appeals court has ruled the regulations could take effect, even as abortion rights advocates and the state continue to battle in court.

As a result, all but eight of 41 abortion clinics in Texas have closed.

All of which makes the new ambulatory surgical center, or ASC, in San Antonio critically important, Hons said. With the enactment of HB 2, not a single abortion provider operates to the south and west of San Antonio, leaving tens of thousands of women with less access to the procedure.



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*A view of the new Planned Parenthood building that is under construction Saturday Oct. 11, 2014.*

Since Sept. 1, when the regulations took effect, Planned Parenthood has leased space at a local surgical center to perform abortions, Hons said. One other clinic in San Antonio, owned by Whole Women's Health, already adhered to surgical center standards. Another clinic is believed to be renting space in an ambulatory surgical center, but that couldn't be confirmed Friday.

A spokeswoman for Texas Right to Life, which backed the new law, said Planned Parenthood's new surgical center in San Antonio revealed "inconsistencies" in the nonprofit's arguments about the HB 2 debate.

"They said there would never be enough money to possibly comply with this law, that it wasn't worth it to comply with the highest safety standards," said legislative associate Emily Horne. "And what's most glaringly inconsistent is that they said HB 2 would disrupt services to rural women, because it was going to close rural clinics. But when (Planned Parenthood South Texas) chose to open a new clinic, they did so in a city that already had a surgical center. That tells me this is about concern for market share, not rural women."

Whether the closure of clinics across West and South Texas means many more women will show up at the surgical center in San Antonio when it opens in December or January remains to be seen, Hons said.

“What we do know is we will be able to continue providing the same services we always have in the last 75 years. And now we will be able to expand on those services,” he said.

He estimated the new center will perform about 2,800 abortions a year — an increase of 1,000 over the number provided two years ago, before HB 2.



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Last summer, when HB 2 passed and parts of it took effect in the fall, Planned Parenthood here cut its abortion services from three clinics to one, and the number of abortions dropped to about 1,260.

But abortions make up only about 10 percent of its services, Hons said. The rest: contraceptive care, cancer screenings, checkups, sexually transmitted disease testing and treatment, and other services.

When Texas legislators booted Planned Parenthood across the state from the mostly federally funded

Women's Health Program in 2012, the local affiliate lost about \$1 million in annual funding. The number of patients per year shrank from 38,000 to 18,000.

“We've learned to live without that money,” Hons said, stepping gingerly around some cables as he conducted a one-person tour of the surgical center. “Now we're ready to grow.”

The surgical center will take up only about a fourth of the building, with most of the remainder used for family planning and sexual health clients, who can also receive primary care, such as diabetes treatment and flu shots.

When the center opens, Planned Parenthood will have five locations in San Antonio, but only the new one will provide abortions, both surgical and those involving the abortion pill, as well as other operations.

“What's exciting is that we won't have to refer out women who need evaluation and treatment for things like uterine bleeding, polyps, fibroids and biopsies,” Hons said. “We can do it ourselves.”

Planned Parenthood affiliates in Houston, Austin, Dallas and Fort Worth either already had a surgical center or undertook plans to create one, Hons said.

But anti-abortion advocates who argue that the presence of surgical centers in major urban areas means the new law won't present an “undue burden” on women trying to access care are wrong, he said.

“That doesn't make this law OK,” Hons said. “You look at all the space between here and Eagle Pass and Cotulla and Harlingen and Sonora, and you feel very, very far away from San Antonio.”

At the Planned Parenthood clinic at 104 Babcock, where abortions have been performed, the procedure was limited to women in their first trimester of pregnancy — when the vast majority of abortions are done.

At the new center, physicians would be able to perform abortions later in pregnancy, although plans to do so haven't been made yet, Hons said. This is an outcome that backers of HB 2 probably didn't envision.

When told that, Horne, the spokeswoman for Texas Right to Life, said: “We're saddened anytime abortions are performed, no matter what stage of pregnancy.

“But from our point of view, the new surgical center at least increases safety for Texas women, and that's an intended consequence of the law.”

Hons said Planned Parenthood started to plan for the new building long before the new regulations.

“We had been in our other home for almost 40 years and had outgrown it,” he said. “We needed a new home to last over the next generation.”

Pat Smothers, chairwoman of the capital campaign that built the surgical center, said Planned Parenthood raised almost all of the \$6.5 million — they're still around \$1 million shy of the goal — within one year.

“We had donations coming in as large as \$1 million, as small as \$500, from Democrats and from Republicans,” she said. “What's happening here in Texas is being followed by people around the nation. A whole new group of people are horrified about what's happening to women's rights.”

Just as abortion restrictions have in the past, the new law targets and will disproportionately affect poor women, especially those in rural areas, Smothers said.

“Many of these women are struggling to raise the children they already have,” she said. “They work minimum-wage jobs that don't afford much leave. They have to pull their children out of school or perhaps leave them with someone who may not be the best caregiver.”

Reports have already surfaced of women in the Rio Grande Valley and other rural areas traveling to obtain illegal abortions in Mexico, she said. So have anecdotal reports of women trying to self-induce abortions with dangerous drugs or other methods.

“We are going backwards into a dangerous time for women,” Smothers said.

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