Indiana and Florida pass new anti-abortion laws

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Indiana and Florida passed similar laws last week that severely limit women's access to abortion and family planning.

On Friday, Florida Governor Rick Scott, a Republican, signed into law a bill that ends state funding for family planning clinics that also provide abortion. The bill targets Planned Parenthood and related organizations.

Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood, said, "As a result of this bill, thousands of people across Florida may no longer be able to access essential reproductive health care, such as cancer screenings, birth control and well-woman exams." Richards' comments draw attention to the connection between the attack on abortion rights and efforts to curtail access to health care more generally.

The bill also attacks access to abortion by requiring doctors who perform the procedure to have "admitting privileges" to a hospital, i.e., to have direct affiliation with a hospital within a 30 mile radius. Doctors who perform abortions often have a difficult time obtaining such an affiliation because hospitals are subjected to pressure from anti-abortion groups and politicians.

This requirement has been used in recent years to effectively deny access to abortion. In Texas, for example, legislation that included this provision reduced the number of clinics in the state that provide abortion services from 40 in 2013 to 21 in 2014. Across all of Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming there is now only one abortion clinic as a result of similar legislation.

In Indiana, Governor Mike Pence, a Republican, signed a bill Thursday that similarly ties the provision of abortion services to having admitting privileges at a hospital.

As Planned Parenthood and others have noted, such laws have the most pronounced impact on poorer people. While they do not ban abortions outright, they reduce their availability, making access to abortion services more dependent on one's income level.

A similar bill in Alabama was ruled unconstitutional by US District Judge Myron Thompson on Friday. He stated that the hospital admittance provision would "impose a substantial obstacle to a woman's choice to undergo an abortion."

The bills in Indiana and Florida are both expected to face similar challenges in court.

In addition to instituting the hospital admittance provision, Indiana's bill makes it illegal to have an abortion because a baby has a disability or is of a specific race or sex. This makes it a crime for a family to terminate a pregnancy after having learned that the child will be born with a significant birth defect.

The law holds the doctor liable if the patient violates any of its provisions, threatening the doctor with the loss of his or her license and even imprisonment. It also imposes new limitations on fetal tissue donation.

These laws come amidst an effort to whip up hysteria over videos released last year that falsely claimed to show representatives of Planned Parenthood selling aborted fetal tissue for profit. Despite Planned Parenthood being cleared of wrongdoing in all the resolved legal cases, and charges being brought against those who created the video, a congressional committee has issued subpoenas on US researchers and workers who make use of fetal tissue.

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