

Texas moves forward with plans to defund Planned Parenthood

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On Tuesday, Texas delivered a final legal notice that it is moving forward with plans to deny Medicaid funding to Planned Parenthood. The decision, which stands to affect thousands of low-income women, will go into effect within 30 days unless Planned Parenthood appeals.

The state did not follow through with its threat to defund the organization for over a year, and Planned Parenthood continued to practice. The organization preemptively filed a lawsuit against the state, waiting for Texas to issue its final notice. It will go forward with that lawsuit instead of filing an injunction against the State.

Planned Parenthood receives no Medicaid funding for abortion services. The organization uses the funds, 90 percent of which come from the federal government, to cover contraception, as well as screenings for breast and reproductive system cancers, for low-income clients. In the past year, Planned Parenthood provided those services to about 11,000 women in Texas.

Governor Greg Abbott led the attack on Planned Parenthood's Medicaid funding in October of 2015. Citing a widely-debunked, controversial video, Abbott stated that Planned Parenthood had committed "acts of misconduct."

The video's veracity has been widely challenged. It was, however, a dream come true for several anti-abortion Republican governors such as Abbott.

The video had been heavily edited in order to make it appear that Planned Parenthood officials had illegally trafficked fetal tissue. It suggested that babies who had survived the abortion process had even been sold for tissue. In the wake of public outcry and disgust over the video, several Republican governors opportunistically moved to deprive Planned Parenthood of any public funding whatsoever.

Texas State Health officials also alluded to accounting fraud on the part of Planned Parenthood, although no one cited any specific cases thereof. State officials hinted, as they did in other states that had attempted to defund Planned Parenthood, that the fraud in question was the channeling of Medicaid funds earmarked for well-woman screenings to abortion services.

Planned Parenthood decried the charges of malfeasance, pointing out that its Texas centers do not donate any fetal tissue to research and mentioning the heavy-handed editing of the video.

Texas Health and Human Services Inspector General Stuart Bowen cited the undercover videos again in the final notice, saying that they demonstrated that Planned Parenthood had "violated state and federal law" and that it had a history of "deviating from acceptable standards" in order to procure tissue samples for researchers. "Your misconduct," he wrote, "is directly related to whether you are qualified to provide medical services in a professionally competent, safe, legal and ethical manner."

Going on, he wrote, "Your actions violate generally accepted medical standards, as reflected in state and federal law, and are Medicaid program violations that justify termination." Texas Planned Parenthood centers have not participated in tissue donation or sales, with the exception of the Houston affiliate's participation with The University of Texas Medical Branch in a 2010 study.

Abbott and other Republican lawmakers in Texas have not stated why they waited so long to file the final notice. Other states, such as Alabama, were ordered by the federal government to reinstate Planned Parenthood's Medicaid funding after cutting it off last year.

Texas' final notice, however, comes amidst a renewed attack on reproductive rights in the United States in the aftermath of the November elections. It is also part of a concerted and opportunistic push by state Republicans to make abortions more difficult, costly, and unpalatable for its citizens.

In November, Texas passed a law requiring aborted fetuses to be buried or cremated. Officials of the Texas Department of State Health Services stated that the rules would "protect the public by preventing the spread of disease while also preserving the dignity of the unborn in a manner consistent with Texas laws." In reality, they represent further attempts to establish the personhood of fetuses and to make abortion more difficult for women--most particularly working class women--to obtain. A federal judge temporarily blocked Texas' attempt to enact that law on December 15.

In June, the US Supreme Court declared it was unconstitutional for Texas to require abortion providers to have admitting privileges with local hospitals and to have surgical facilities. The law would have meant the closure of most of the state's abortion clinics.

Texas is not the only state where abortion rights are being stripped away. Early in December, Ohio lawmakers passed a law banning abortions after six weeks of pregnancy, a time when many women are not yet aware that they are pregnant. The state had also passed fetal burial laws similar to the one currently blocked in Texas, and its Department of Health recently revoked the license of the state's largest abortion facility, citing an inadequate number of physicians to provide backup care.

Throughout the United States, right-wing lawmakers are attempting to subvert the abortion rights granted by the 1973 *Roe v Wade* decision. Laws such as Depraved Heart Murder laws, by which pregnant drug addicts can be prosecuted for murder in instances of miscarriage or stillbirth, along with fetal burial laws that require fetal tissues to be disposed of in the same manner as a dead body, all represent attempts at imbuing fetuses with human rights at the expense of women's emotional, physical, and financial well-being.

These laws are squarely aimed at working class women, who cannot afford to travel to distant locations for an abortion or pay for the burial of an aborted fetus. These are laws that will not affect upper-middle class women in the same way. In addition to placing a heavy

burden of expense upon pregnant women, they also give state governments broad leeway in criminalizing their activity. Many reproductive rights advocates have pointed out that this endangers women who have miscarried or who need abortions in order to survive.



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