

Alabama Governor Signs Law Tightening Abortion Clinic Rules

Doctors who provide abortions will face stricter standards in Alabama starting in July under a law signed on Tuesday that requires them to have admitting privileges at hospitals in the state.

Proponents say the legislation, the latest salvo in the national debate over abortion, will make pregnancy terminations safer, while critics say it will unnecessarily restrict a woman's right under the U.S. Constitution to choose an abortion.

The Alabama bill was passed last week by state lawmakers and signed by Republican Governor Robert Bentley, a former dermatologist.

"As a physician, and as a governor, I am proud to sign this legislation," Bentley said in a statement. "This bill provides appropriate standards of care. It has been endorsed by pro-life groups across Alabama."

Most Alabama clinics hire out-of-town physicians to provide abortions and partner with local doctors who have hospital admitting privileges to provide follow-up care.

Alabama is the seventh state to require hospital admitting privileges for abortion providers, according to Elizabeth Nash, state issues manager at the Washington-based Guttmacher Institute, which studies reproductive health.

A similar law in Mississippi is threatening to shutter that state's sole abortion clinic, which has been unable to obtain hospital privileges for its physicians.

Nash said the increased stigma and fear of reprisals associated with abortion has over time resulted in fewer providers entering the field. A lack of providers often forces clinics to look beyond their immediate cities to find doctors willing to perform abortions.

In Alabama, the state's four licensed abortion clinics will have 180 days to meet the new standards after the law takes effect on July 1. The measure also mandates the clinics to meet the same facility standards as ambulatory care centers.

As with the law in Mississippi, legal challenges are expected from advocacy groups such as Planned Parenthood.

Nikema Williams, vice president of public policy for Planned Parenthood Southeast, said it "stands ready to do whatever it takes to protect Alabamians' health and rights in the face of this dangerous law and blatant attack on women's health and rights."

Lawmakers across the country have passed new restrictions on abortion rights in recent years, including laws approved in the last month in North Dakota and Arkansas that are seen as direct challenges to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that legalized abortion in 1973.

North Dakota in late March became the first state to approve a ban on most abortions once a fetal heartbeat can be detected, about six weeks into pregnancy, and the first to ban abortions solely because of fetal genetic anomalies.

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