

Judge Delays Enforcement of Alabama Abortion Law Until 2014

A federal judge on Tuesday delayed until next year the enforcement of Alabama's new abortion law, which tightens restrictions on providers and, according to opponents, could force the closing of more than half of the state's abortion clinics.

The law, signed by Republican Gov. Robert Bentley in April, requires every doctor who performs an abortion at a clinic to have staff privileges at a local hospital and mandates the clinics meet the same facility standards as ambulatory care centers.

The law was set to go into effect on Aug. 15.

Tuesday's order by U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson delays the law until March 24, 2014, while the court moves forward on a lawsuit filed in June by Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The delay comes as similar laws have been passed in a number of states.

A law in Mississippi threatens to close the state's sole abortion clinic, which has been unable to obtain hospital privileges for its physicians.

Nine states, including Alabama, have laws on the books requiring abortion clinics to conform to ambulatory care center standards, according to the National Abortion Rights Action League.

Supporters of the law argue it is intended to make abortions safer and improve patient care. But critics say the law will

unnecessarily restrict a woman's right under the U.S. Constitution to have an abortion.

The lawsuit said the law will lead to the closure of three out of the state's five licensed health centers that provide abortions.

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

Doctors at the clinics are often unable to obtain staff privileges because local hospitals oppose abortion or they live too far from the area, the lawsuit said.

The law "would unconstitutionally restrict the ability of Alabama women, including victims of rape and incest, to access safe and legal abortions," said Wayne Sabel, an attorney representing Planned Parenthood Southeast.

State Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, a Republican who sponsored the legislation, said the law's aim was not to shut abortion clinics.

"I am surprised they are filing lawsuits instead of bringing the clinics up to code," she said when the suit was filed.

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