

Surprise Inspections of Arizona Abortion Clinics May Soon Be Reality

Arizona lawmakers advanced a Republican-backed measure on Tuesday that would allow unannounced inspections of licensed abortion clinics in a state that has taken some of the country's toughest stances on abortion.

The bill, which passed in the state House of Representatives 34-22, would delete a provision in state law mandating that an administrative warrant be obtained from a judge to inspect any of the nine licensed abortion clinics in Arizona. A warrant is not required to inspect other clinics and medical facilities.

"This is not a pro-life versus pro-choice issue. This is about the healthiness of a facility where a woman goes to get a procedure done," said Republican Rep. Debbie Lesko, the bill's sponsor. "What is it that they have to hide?"

The measure, which still must be approved by the state Senate and signed by Republican Gov. Jan Brewer before it can become law, is the latest abortion-related restriction to be sought by conservatives in state legislatures across the United States.

Arizona state Rep. Lisa Otondo, a Democrat, described it as "a slap in the face to women and to taxpayers who end up paying for unconstitutional bills."

Opponents said it was almost certain the bill from the conservative Center for Arizona Policy would be challenged in court if it becomes law.

Lawmakers in the southwestern U.S. state have taken steps to limit abortions, and a federal appeals court last year struck

down as unconstitutional an Arizona 2012 law banning abortions from 20 weeks gestation, except in medical emergencies. Late-term abortions remain relatively rare.

Abortion rights groups described that Arizona measure at the time as more extreme than similar laws in other states because the way Arizona measures gestation means it would bar abortions two weeks earlier than in other states.

If the surprise inspection measure is ultimately signed into law, Arizona would join 10 other states that allow for such surprise inspections, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit sexual health organization. Only one Republican voted against the bill.

Arizona lawmakers previously approved surprise inspections in 1999, but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down the provision as unconstitutional. New regulations governing abortion clinics took effect in 2010.

Backers of the bill have said the court's concerns now have been remedied by the new rules. Opponents dispute that. Planned Parenthood Arizona president Bryan Howard said the bill would "open the door to provider and patient harassment."

The measure comes shortly after the Arizona lawmakers found themselves in the national spotlight over passage of another controversial bill on whether business owners could use their religious beliefs as grounds for refusing to serve some customers.

Last Wednesday, Brewer rejected that bill, which critics derided as a license to discriminate against gays and others. The bill had attracted widespread opposition from businesses and political leaders nationwide.

