

Proposed buffer zones around abortion clinics unnecessary and unfair, say Alberta pro-lifers

Alberta's NDP government has introduced a bill to create 50-metre buffer zones around abortion clinics, with the hope of keeping pro-life protesters at bay and preventing them from harassing patients and staff.

"This is about freedom from intimidation tactics that rely on shame and stigmatization as well as fear to prevent Alberta women from exercising their choice about their health," Health Minister Sarah Hoffman said at a news conference April 5.



Health Minister Sarah Hoffman

But Samantha Williams, executive director of The Back Porch – an Edmonton pro-life advocacy centre – believes the bill is unnecessary and unfairly targets peaceful protesters.

"I don't see how women or a couple would be restricted from abortion access just because people are praying across the street," said Williams.

"People who are vegan and protest against butcher shops (are) allowed freedom of speech to protest right outside a meat shop, but pro-life people aren't allowed that same right."

If passed, Bill 9 – the Protecting Choice for Women Accessing Health Care Act –

would ban demonstrations within 50 metres of an abortion clinic. Doctors and abortion service providers could also request a buffer zone up to 160 metres for their homes or 20 metres for their offices.

Taking photos and recording videos of patients and staff would be illegal. It would also be against the law to contact a doctor repeatedly and try to convince them not to perform abortions.

Protesters could face up to \$5,000 in fines and six months in jail for a first offence. There are harsher penalties for subsequent offences, including fines up to \$10,000 and one year in prison.

"This is meant as a significant deterrent, and I hope police will never have to use it," Hoffman said.

The Back Porch is within 50 metres of Woman's Health Options, the Edmonton clinic that provides abortions. However, it is considered private property and would not be subject to the legislation.

Since 2010, more than 103,000 surgical abortions have been performed in Alberta, with 75 per cent of them occurring at the Edmonton and Calgary clinics.

Court injunctions already limit how close demonstrations can be, but pro-choice advocates say that protesters regularly violate the injunctions and don't face any consequences.

"Protesters routinely violate the injunction with impunity, taking advantage of the fact that the police have little enforcement power via the injunction," said Joyce Arthur, the executive director for the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada.

Arthur said protesters often harass patients with offensive signs, verbal abuse, and occasional attacks, noting the Kensington abortion clinic in Calgary has been vandalized in the past.

Hoffman argues that the bill is necessary since clinics have seen a significant rise those types of protests.

But when asked by reporters, Hoffman and Kim Cholewa – the executive director of Woman's Health Options – could not provide data evidence of increased pro-life activity outside clinic.

"It would just be my gut," said Cholewa, adding that she has seen protesters standing at the vehicles of patients and talking to them.

However, critics call it a political move aimed at solidifying NDP support before next provincial election, expected to be called in the spring of 2019.

"I don't think this is just a clean attempt to protect women's rights; this is

about supporting their donors and restricting our rights and freedoms,” said Stephanie Fennelly, the executive director of The Wilberforce Project, a Edmonton pro-life advocacy group.

Phil Horgan, the president of the Catholic Civil Rights League, adds “the government is engaged in advancing the interests of private abortion businesses, without any evidence of serious problems that cannot be addressed through other means.”

No abortion clinic in the Prairies—Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba—reported any vandalism or violent interference, according to a 2012 study of abortion providers in Canada.

The Catholic Civil Rights League unsuccessfully campaigned against the Ontario buffer zone legislation, saying pro-life protesters were being singled out. Quebec and Newfoundland have passed similar legislation. British Columbia has had a buffer zone law since 1996.