

6 Women's health shouldn't depend on ZIP code

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Abortion has been a safe, legal option for Texas women since 1973 because of a Dallas woman who in 1970 began her long journey to have the right to make this personal and private medical decision on her own. Her story was told in courtroom after courtroom till it finally reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that abortion is a right of American women protected by the U.S. Constitution.

In recent years, politicians at the Texas Capitol have passed law after law to limit access to safe, legal abortions. After two controversial special sessions of the Texas Legislature in 2013, state politicians passed a law that triggered more than half of the clinics in Texas to completely close or to stop providing safe, legal abortion services.

Planned Parenthood in Waco stopped providing abortions following that law. Texas' controversial abortion law mandated detailed construction and operational specifications. The statute included scores of

unnecessary mandates, such as the width of the clinic's janitor's closet, the type of electric generator and laundry-room dimensions.

These directives did not enhance women's health but did dramatically reduce access to abortion services, especially for low-income and rural women. In Waco, women who chose to have a safe, legal abortion were required to travel to Austin, Dallas or Fort Worth if they could secure child care, transportation, time off work and the necessary funds — all obstacles for low-income women.

What happened then? Public health data showed that Central Texas women traveled farther to have legal abortions, often having abortions later in their pregnancies. Some without

access to abortion services risked do-it-yourself abortions. Again, low-income women were disproportionately impacted by these political barriers.

When the U.S. Supreme Court issued a June 2016 ruling on Texas' abortion restrictions, it affirmed the rights and dignity of women to make personal health-care decisions. As Justice Stephen G. Breyer wrote for the majority in the 5-3 decision: "We conclude that neither of these provisions offers medical benefits sufficient to justify the burdens upon access that each imposes. Each places a substantial obstacle in the path of women seeking a pre-viability abortion, each constitutes an undue burden on abortion access and each violates the federal Constitution." The high court's ruling eliminated Texas' unnecessary clinic mandates, enabling Planned Parenthood to restore abortion services in Waco adjacent to its longstanding women's health clinic, which provides family planning and health-screening services.

Waco women deserve the same access as other Texas women. A woman's ZIP code or income level should not determine whether she can have access to an abortion, which continues to be a safe, lawful option in the United States.

By restoring abortion care in Waco, Planned Parenthood is providing an obtainable resource for Central Texas women. In addition, by making birth control accessible and affordable, including IUDs and birth control implants, Planned Parenthood is partnering with women to ensure that they have the resources they need to prevent unintended pregnancies and to continue to make personal and private medical decisions to support their health and their families.

Nan Little Kirkpatrick is executive director of the nonprofit Texas Equal Access Fund, which serves the northern half of Texas by helping low-income Texans who want an abortion with funding to cover a portion of the procedure. Tamara Armstrong chairs the Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas/Waco board.

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