

South Bend Tribune

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Viewpoint: Intimidation and harassment don't belong in community

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Published 2:54 p.m. ET May 24, 2021

One of the most fundamental rights that we have in a free society is the right to full autonomy over our own body. Exercising this right means that everyone must be able to make their own medical decisions. While we may disagree on some fundamental issues, the fact is that nearly one in four women will have an abortion in her lifetime. So when someone has made the decision to terminate a pregnancy, they deserve access to the health services they need with dignity and respect, and in a safe, peaceful environment free from harassment and intimidation.

Yet, that is not the reality that our patients encounter. While we respect the right to protest and have peaceful assembly on public land, we do not understand the attacks patients must endure when they come to Whole Woman's Health of South Bend. The anti-abortion protests on Lincoln Way West are disruptive, create an unsafe environment and often violate city laws and ordinances including trespassing on private property. You may have seen and heard the clinic surrounded by people shouting insults and holding graphic signs; imagine if you were greeted at your doctor's office this way.

Every week, protesters convene in front of the clinic to amplify targeted and violent speech. Protesters intimidate patients and staff by calling them sinners and killers who deserve to be executed. They also violate public order when they create traffic hazards for vehicles on Lincoln Way West by spilling into the street and blocking clear access to the driveway with their bodies and signs. This situation is escalating, and we are concerned for the safety of the patients, staff, volunteers and neighbors.

On a recent Saturday, nearly 100 protesters descended on the clinic, erecting tents and large signs and preventing patients from being able to access the driveway. Patients and staff feared for their safety. The South Bend and broader Michiana community should agree on the simple premise that it is unacceptable to harass and intimidate your fellow Hoosiers. People of all walks of life come to us for support, and we meet them where they are. Whether they decide to

get an abortion or not, we respect their decision and support them every step of the way. We hope you can respect their choice too.

Enforcing basic laws of the community like trespassing, clear use of driveways, and sign and noise ordinances would improve the safety and security of the clinic staff, volunteers, and patients, as well as those living in the surrounding neighborhoods. Enforcement could also prevent escalation to more serious and dangerous crimes. In the absence of consistent enforcement, the protesters are emboldened to continue and intensify their illegal activities.

Instead of instilling fear in our neighbors and hurling personal attacks on those who are simply trying to access reproductive healthcare services, let's work together to create a community that supports families and values the right to decide if and when to parent. We believe that meeting the needs of the whole woman should also include wider access to comprehensive sexuality education, maternal and infant health care, child care services, paid parental leave and protections against pregnancy discrimination. People need support and security to lead healthy reproductive lives, including access to the local, affordable and quality care provided by Whole Woman's Health of South Bend.

We call on our government officials, including South Bend Mayor James Mueller, St. Joseph County Prosecutor Kenneth Cotter and Chief of Police Scott Ruskowski, to uphold their duty to serve this community and enforce its laws on behalf of all residents. Together, we can ensure that all Hoosiers are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.