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Florida providers say young women, violence victims harmed by abortion restrictions



Chasity Maynard/Orlando Sentinel

A rally participant grabs a “Bans Off My Body” sticker during the March for Abortion Access at City Hall on Saturday, Oct. 2, 2021 in Orlando, Fla. (Chasity Maynard/Orlando Sentinel)



By **NELLY ONTIVEROS CERVANTES**

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Asked to explain how Florida's new abortion laws have impacted her practice, Dr. Shelly Tien shared the story of an abused teenager who came to her north Florida clinic for help — but had to be sent to another state.

“She was an incest survivor, and we were not able to care for her because she was past 15 weeks [pregnant],” Tien said.

Tien, an obstetrician and gynecologist, told the patient's story last week at a press conference held by Planned Parenthood of South, East and North Florida. She is among a chorus of health professionals who say Florida's 15-week abortion ban and the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* have disproportionately harmed young women and victims of abuse.

Florida prohibited most [abortions](#) after 15 weeks of pregnancy, with no exceptions for rape or incest, earlier this year. Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the legislation that took effect on July 1.

Tien said the girl was transported to an out-of-state facility where she received the appropriate care. Tien said young women, female victims of intimate partner violence and women who have desired pregnancy but learn of a fetal diagnosis past the 15-week threshold are among the patients she has had to turn away.

“It is horrifying to me that in a lot of the public discourse on abortion and abortion restrictions and exceptions, we are so dismissive of violence and the impact of violence for women and girls,” she said.

Tien said an internal system facilitates the relocation of patients, but traveling for care creates its own challenges for women experiencing pregnancy as a result of violence.

Ina McDonald, health manager at the Tallahassee clinic, said her clinic has received an increased number of patients and has seen how traveling long distances to access abortion care brings stress and anxiety for pregnant women and those around them.

McDonald said prior to the Supreme Court decision to overrule *Roe v. Wade*, the facility received between 30 to 40 patients a day. Now, the number of patients ranges from 80 to 85 a day.

She said patients come from Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas — all states [with abortion bans in place](#) — as well as South Carolina, where [a six-week ban has been suspended](#) by the state Supreme Court.

“We recently helped a Florida patient who needed to go to a major medical center in Pennsylvania due to her physician here in Florida detecting a severe fetal diagnosis, a condition that threatened the woman’s life,” McDonald said. “It was difficult, very dangerous, it was a very dangerous pregnancy for her and because we are no longer able to care for patients past the 15 weeks, we wanted to make sure she went to the best hospital we could find for her situation.”

McDonald also shared the story of a woman experiencing domestic violence who sought to end her pregnancy. The woman’s partner forced her to share cell phones, which required health providers to be even more cautious, McDonald said.

“We had to be very careful in how we contacted her. [We] couldn’t just call and say ‘Planned Parenthood,’” she said. “We were only able to get her a flight booked the day before her appointment so that she could quickly fly there and back in order to avoid her partner becoming suspicious.”

Anna Varlamov, an obstetrician and gynecologist in Central Florida, told the Orlando Sentinel the 15-week abortion ban complicates the timeline for patients and doctors.

She said several abnormalities are not identified until after 15 weeks of pregnancy while preliminary fetal testing can take anywhere from 7 to 15 days to produce results.

“I’ve now had at least two patients who just went ahead and had an abortion, risking that it may be a completely normal fetus, simply because they weren’t willing to risk losing that choice,” she said.

Varlamov said most of the cases she has seen in Orlando are young people.

“It’s usually patients 15 to 25 years of age, some of them didn’t know they were pregnant, some of them were too scared to tell their parents,” Varlamov said. “It’s a little bit difficult because I can’t tell you what happened to those patients, because they don’t follow them once they are turned away from our practice.”

Varlamov argues the new state law rushes the decision-making that takes place between physicians and patients at clinics and will keep affecting the lives of those women who are turned away.

Tien, who also expressed her concern for physicians who live in fear and hesitation of acting due to the law, said the restriction overlooks the complexity of medicine and the decision that must be made between a patient and a health provider.

“As healthcare providers and as physicians, we are not trained to wait until a patient is so sick and at death’s door before we intervene, our training is that the moment that we recognize that a patient is becoming sick, we need to intervene,” Tien said.

contiveros@orlandosentinel.com

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