

Black Women Left Behind

As reproductive health clinics shutter, African American women face daunting barriers to care

AMBER MADISON WAS 21 WHEN she became pregnant. She decided to end the pregnancy and wanted to have a surgical abortion, but she couldn't get an appointment at a clinic in her home state of Texas; all of them were overbooked.

Her story is not uncommon. In the last two years, Texas legislators have passed some of the strictest anti-abortion laws in the country, causing the number of clinics in the state to drop precipitously from 41 to 18. The remaining clinics are beleaguered, unable to keep up with increased patient demand. And clinic closures are happening all over the country, particularly in the South where some of the harshest Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider (TRAP) laws are being enacted.

As more and more clinics shutter, African American women like Madison are impacted the most. That's because women of color and low-income women access abortion serv-

ices more often than any other group.

"For so many [low-income] women who are reliant on public transportation, who do not have a car, who cannot take time off of work, when the clinics close they have lost access to abortion services," says Elizabeth Nash of the Guttmacher Institute.

Nationwide, women seeking abortions have to travel an average of 30 miles from their homes to undergo the procedure. But if there are no clinics nearby, a woman could find herself having to drive hundreds of miles to end her pregnancy. And for women of color who disproportionately work in low-income jobs that offer little or no paid time off, taking a day or two off of work to make that trip means a loss of income; some women could even lose their jobs.

On top of that, women of color lose access to many other critical health services when clinics close, such as STI testing and cancer screenings. That puts their lives in

jeopardy: Black women are twice as likely to die from cervical cancer as white women and are also more likely to die from breast cancer—despite being less likely to be diagnosed.

"There are really serious, deeply personal and painful stories that are happening in our communities where women are the most vulnerable and have the least protection," says Dazon Dixon Diallo, founder of the reproductive-justice nonprofit SisterLove in Atlanta.

But black communities aren't staying silent about the assault on abortion access, and research has shown that African Americans overwhelmingly support women's reproductive rights. According to a nationwide survey sponsored by In Our Own Voice, a coalition of black reproductive-justice groups, 85 percent of black women and men agree that black women should be trusted to make their own reproductive choices, and 71 percent believe abortion should be available in their communities.

"When you can't control your reproduction, you can't control your life," says Dr. Joycelyn Elders, who is the former U.S. surgeon general and currently a professor at the University of Arkansas.

"Black women's lives matter," Elders adds. "We've been overlooked, overworked, stressed out and not supported by society. We can do better and we must."

—ANITA LITTLE

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) introducing the new bill Equal Access to Abortion Coverage in Health Insurance or EACH Act to repeal the Hyde Amendment and require all health insurances cover abortion, including Medicaid, which serves low-income populations

