

Rival groups now neighbors



Staff photo — Jerry Larson

John Pisciotta, co-director of Pro-Life Waco, looks around at guests visiting a house his group helped rent next to a Planned Parenthood clinic, where abortions are performed.

Abortion opponents rent house next to Planned Parenthood clinic

By Cindy V. Culp

Tribune-Herald staff writer

Local abortion opponents have rented a house next door to a Waco Planned Parenthood clinic in hopes that having a more permanent presence at the site will help steer women away from the reproductive health organization.

The strategy has been successful in other cities, said the Rev. Rusty Thomas, one of Waco's most vocal anti-abortion activists and a leader with national group Operation Rescue.

Not only have babies been saved

by a "ministry of proximity," he said, but clinic workers also have changed their stance on the procedure and quit.

"We want folks to know God is not far off somewhere, unconcerned ... This will be our beachhead of prayer," Thomas said.

The lease of the property, located at 1925 Columbus Ave., was announced at a news conference Thursday. Thomas said a number of Christian groups are involved in the effort, which is being called Hope House.

The groups include his organization — Elijah Ministries — as well as Pro-Life Waco and several local churches, he said.

But the money to rent the property is primarily coming from a single

donor, said John Pisciotta, co-director of Pro-Life Waco. He declined to disclose the person's identity, saying the individual wants to remain anonymous.

Planned Parenthood of Central Texas CEO Felicia Goodman said the organization heard rumors for several months that anti-abortion groups might move in next door. But it didn't get official confirmation until this week.

Intimidating patients

Goodman said she views the development as another attempt to intimidate Planned Parenthood and its patients. She said only 4 percent of Planned Parenthood's business in Waco involves abortion.

Most clients use Planned Parent-

hood for services such as birth control, sexually transmitted disease testing and cancer screenings, she said.

"They're going to stop at nothing to try to block access to lifesaving health care and intimidate our patients," Goodman said. "... But we're not going to change anything we do. We're going to continue to provide health care to the men and women in our community."

Pisciotta and Thomas said it has been a longtime goal to acquire property near the clinic. The current effort got started several months ago, when activists learned the family who lived in the home was moving.

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The family wanted to sell the home, but when that didn't materialize, it agreed to rent to the anti-abortion groups, Thomas said. He said organizers were up front with the homeowners about their plans for the house. The lease contract is for six months, he said.

"We'll just have to see what happens after that," Thomas said. A key use of the property will be as a staging area for activists' weekly abortion protests, Thomas said. Between 40 and 70 people typically show up. Some hold anti-abortion signs or implore women going into Planned Parenthood to change their minds. Others simply pray.

In the past, protesters have been limited to the sidewalk and public rights-of-way in front of the clinic.

Renting the house will help with logistical concerns, Thomas said. For example, activists will have somewhere to park, use the restroom, get a drink of water or take refuge from the weather, he said.

Activists said they want the house to serve as a billboard of sorts. A number of signs with anti-abortion messages already adorn the front porch and a fence. Plus, there are pink and blue flags lining the sidewalk.

On Thursday, the groups also tied three balloons to the mailbox — one pink, one blue and one black.

"It really tells the choices the women have," Pisciotta said of the decoration. "Maybe it's a lifesaver, \$3 worth of balloons there."

In addition, Thomas said he has put out a "nationwide call" for missionaries who want to live at the house and do "pro-life" work. That would likely include everyday interaction with women who go to the

Columbus Avenue clinic, as well as clients at Planned Parenthood's other clinic here. Located on Ross Avenue, it does not provide abortions.

Operation Rescue

The idea of abortion opponents setting up shop near an abortion clinic dates back to 1995, when Operation Rescue opened an office next-door to a Dallas clinic, Thomas said. That clinic was run by Norma McCorvey, who is better known by the pseudonym "Jane Roe." She was the plaintiff in the landmark abortion case Roe v. Wade.

The group's presence there led to McCorvey and a number of other workers changing their mind about abortion, Thomas said. McCorvey is now an outspoken abortion opponent.

Locally, Planned Parenthood has had ideological opposition close by for about two and half years. Care Net Pregnancy Center of Central Texas opened an office a few doors

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Rev. Rusty Thomas,
 anti-abortion activist

down on Columbus Avenue in early 2009.

Care Net, which opposes abortion, uses the location to counsel clients facing a crisis pregnancy.

Officials have said the organization didn't pick the location because it was near Planned Parenthood. But they like the proximity because it boosts Care Net's visibility to women who may be considering abortion, they have said.

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