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PLANNED PARENTHOOD

Women's health facility consolidates clinics

By Cindy V. Culp

Tribune-Herald staff writer

Planned Parenthood has consolidated its two Waco clinics into one building, meaning an end to abortion protests for one neighborhood and the increased presence of activists in another.

The family planning agency was using a building at 1927 Colum-

bus Ave. to provide abortions and other nongovernment-funded services. But officials stopped patient care there and moved operations to Planned Parenthood's other site, 1121 Ross Ave.

The move will not mean any changes to the mix of services Planned Parenthood offers, said Pam Smallwood, interim co-CEO of Planned Parenthood's

Austin affiliate.

The Ross Avenue building was remodeled with a new surgical suite, which will allow for abortions to be performed, she said.

The move is a cost-cutting measure, Smallwood said. The clinic will use less square footage at its new location and cut down on overhead costs, she said.

"We must make sure we're us-

ing our dollars as effectively as possible because our expenses have gone up," said Smallwood, whose affiliate is managing Waco operations.

The Columbus Avenue neighborhood has witnessed weekly protests since Planned Parenthood began offering abortions there in 1994.

At times, tensions about the protests ran high.

Waco Montessori School sits directly across the street from the building, and parents and school personnel complained about traffic congestion created by protesters, as well as graphic signs of aborted fetuses displayed by some activists.

Some parents at the school grinned when told about the

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change Wednesday. Regardless of their view of abortion, they said, the spectacle that came along with the protests was an issue.

"I could do without the visuals," said Joe Wade, whose two children attend the school. "I didn't like driving down here and having to tell the kids, 'Look right,' because they can't look at the signs."

John Pisciotta, director of Pro-Life Waco, said his group will move its weekly protests to the Ross Avenue site. It has demonstrated there on occasion before, he said, adding that site is better for activists.

The weekly protests average about 30 people.

"It's more hospitable because it's on the corner, with more exposure," Pisciotta said.

The neighborhood around the joint site, which is at the corner of Ross Avenue and 12th Street, consists of private homes and Kate Ross Homes, a public housing complex.

Gary Moore, CEO of Waco Housing Authority, said past protests at the site have not sparked complaints from the complex's residents. But the demonstrations have been infrequent, he said.

"We'll just have to see how it goes," Moore said.

Smallwood predicted the neighborhood will take the change in stride. Planned Parenthood has had a presence there since the early 1960s, she said, and residents have been supportive of its work. Quite a few residents are patients, she said.

Clinic changes

The existing clinic at the site is officially known as the Mary Ruth Duncan Women's Health Center. It provides government-funded health care services such as birth control, testing for sexually transmitted diseases and cancer screenings.

People must be low-income to receive government-subsidized care. Last year, the clinic served about 8,000 people.

The relocated clinic is called Planned Parenthood of Waco Family Planning and

Surgical Services. It provides an array of reproductive health care services, including abortions.

The clinic does not receive government money. The roughly 4,000 patients seen there each year are either insured or pay out of pocket, Smallwood said.

State law does not allow organizations that provide abortions to receive government money.

Because of that, Planned Parenthood separated its two clinics into separate legal entities years ago.

That separation will continue at the new site, Smallwood said. The two clinics even have separate signs and entrances, she said.

Pisciotta said he thinks the move is significant. He noted that Planned Parenthood closed its satellite offices in Falls and Limestone counties this spring.

"It is a retrenchment," Pisciotta said of the closure of the Columbus Avenue site. "I see it as a partial victory. But abortions continue, so I'm not cracking open any champagne."

This summer, a coalition of anti-abortion activists that included Pro-Life Waco rented a house located next door to the Columbus Avenue building. The group christened it "Hope House" and said it hoped that having a permanent presence near the clinic would steer women away from Planned Parenthood.

Shortly after that announcement, a Christian couple wanting to help women in crisis expressed interest in buying the home. Since they had more concrete plans and would allow the group to use the property for outreach purposes, the group stepped aside to let the couple buy the home, Pisciotta said.

The owner, Brandon Harris, said Planned Parenthood's move will change how he and his wife go about reaching women. But it doesn't change the need for ministry to those facing a crisis pregnancy.

Harris said he still hopes to provide temporary living quarters to women in need, as well as other services such as Bible studies.

cculp@wacotrib.com
757-5744

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