

Legislators taking a toll on Waco women

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Guest
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I lost my mother to breast cancer when I was a teenager. She was 38 and lacked access to basic health care that would have likely caught her cancer at an earlier and more treatable stage. Losing her in this way galvanized my decision to become a family physician and to dedicate my professional life to providing improved access to quality health care for everyone.

I moved back to my home state of Texas because I wanted to give back to my community more directly. I am dismayed and saddened by the direct damage done to the public health safety net and in turn to women's health and the health of communities by the failed policies of our legislature.

The votes by Texas legislators on women's health are causing negative, devastating consequences for uninsured women with limited options for cancer screenings, annual exams, birth control and other health care. There is no question about this: Study after study shows that our state continues to fail the people who count on us, putting preventive health-care screenings out of reach for

so many in our community.

I see this every day as I interact with patients and their families here in Waco. They face limited options for health-care appointments. This directly impacts health and health outcomes. A routine cervical cancer screening that is delayed can lead to cervical cancer with life-threatening consequences. Access to birth control, for example, allows women to treat debilitating endometriosis or allows a new mom to plan and space her next pregnancy to improve birth outcomes. If you are uninsured and live paycheck to paycheck, these appointments can be unaffordable or unavailable.

McLennan County has seen firsthand the negative impact of the votes made at the Texas Legislature when the Planned Parenthood health

center in Waco was banned from continued participation in a federally funded breast and cervical cancer screening program. As a result, women forgo or delay breast and cervical cancer screenings as well as desired birth control that would have been accessible to them from our local Planned Parenthood.

Our community already faces challenging health disparities: 18 percent of McLennan County residents are without health insurance (compared to the 9 percent national rate), and we face a teen birth rate nearly *twice* the national average. Despite having average or lower than average rates of cervical and breast cancer compared to state and national rates, the number of women dying of these diseases in our community exceeds both state and national averages.

Federal family planning funding that covers the cost of annual exams, STD treatment and family planning services was blocked for Planned Parenthood patients last fall and, just last week, Texas state officials notified the Waco Planned Parenthood health

center that patients could no longer receive HPV vaccines that prevent cancer through Texas' vaccines program.

These policies fail our community and all Texans, with uninsured and low-income women paying the price by going without health care. This year a new bill (SB22/HB1929) again targets women's health care at Planned Parenthood. Specifically, it would ban every local government from partnering with Planned Parenthood to provide HPV education, STD prevention services, birth control services or outreach.

Tax dollars do *not* fund abortion in Texas. Instead, these bills block access to health care for Planned Parenthood patients and reduce access to reproductive health-care appointments, especially for low-income Texans and women of color. This is what we see in the numbers statewide, and this is what I see in my health-care practice every day. Texans need and deserve better.

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