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“Aggressive protesters”

Governor signs law that could mean tougher stance by law enforcement against pro-lifers outside abortion centers

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has signed into law a bill extending for another five years the “Reproductive Rights Law Enforcement Act,” which requires the state to gather statistics on crimes against abortion providers – and adds a provision that could result in police taking a more hostile approach against what Planned Parenthood calls “aggressive protesters.”

[[PadillaGobernator072908.jpg]]According to a July 25 press release from the governor’s office, Schwarzenegger signed the bill, SB 1770, last week along with four other pieces of legislation. Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Pacoima was the bill’s author. The measure passed the state Senate 24-13, and the Assembly 45-29, largely along party lines – Democrats in favor, Republicans opposed.

The bill extends from Jan. 1, 2009 to Jan. 1, 2014 the “sunset provision” of the existing law. In addition, it adds a requirement that law enforcement personnel receive additional training on how to recognize crimes against abortion clinics and abortion providers, with the goal of less mediation and more arrests.

Reports from the California Department of Justice mandated by the existing law suggest the extension may not be necessary. According to the Department of Justice, just 31 crimes against abortion providers were reported between 2003 and 2006.

In 2003, according to the Department of Justice, there were 10 reports of crimes against abortion providers; eight reports in 2004, nine reports in 2005 and just four reports in 2006. Of the four reports in 2006, three were assaults occurring in Butte, San Joaquin, and Riverside counties, and one was for vandalism in Los Angeles County.

But Planned Parenthood, the state’s largest abortion provider, complained to the legislature that the Department of Justice’s statistics are misleading because police officers often do not report violations of the state’s Freedom of Access to Clinics Act. “Statewide, Planned Parenthood health centers, their clients, practitioners, and volunteers face arson attempts, blockades, repeated vandalism, aggressive protesters, intimidation, threats and more, all in direct violation of the California FACE Act,” said a legislative analyst’s evaluation of the bill.

According to Planned Parenthood and its allies, law enforcement has systematically under-reported crimes against abortion providers, often preferring to make peace between pro-lifers and abortion providers during confrontations than to make arrests. According to the legislative analyst, “A survey by the California Senate Office of Research showed that more than half (50.9%) of participating clinics and medical offices experienced anti-reproductive rights crimes between 1995 and 2000. Forty-eight percent of survey participants who reported the crimes to law enforcement were dissatisfied with the response. The report indicates, ‘complaints about responses included officers who were unfamiliar with the law, officers who tried to mediate... rather than mak[e] arrests, and law enforcement agencies accused of refusing to enforce laws other than for major cases.’”

Pro-lifers who conduct vigils outside abortion centers, however, say it is they who are the victims of mistreatment. For example, in October 2007, the Rev. Walter B. Hoye II, executive elder of the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church of Berkeley, who for the last two years has regularly engaged in pro-life sidewalk counseling at the Family Planning Specialists abortion clinic in Oakland, told *California Catholic Daily* that he and other pro-lifers are frequently harassed, bullied and physically attacked by “escorts” hired by the abortion clinic.

“We are supposed to share the sidewalks, but I myself have been pushed and shoved,” Hoye said. “If they are on the left, I go to the right. If they want to walk ahead of me, I let them.”

Hoye said the escorts are so aggressive that some pro-lifers fear for their safety. “I have witnessed them stalking,” he said. “They will follow you to your car and write down your license plate number. One lady that I work with had to take refuge in a coffee shop because they kept following her, trying to find her car. She was afraid to go back to her car. They jumped in their car and followed her to her car, then blocked her, preventing her from pulling out.”

Abortion clinic escorts have subjected elderly women who join Hoye to the same aggressive behavior. “I saw them push an 89-year-old lady! They also pushed an 80-year-old woman I work with,” he said. “The 89-year-old lady stands on the edge of the curb on the sidewalk and says softly, ‘Abortion stops a beating heart.’ That’s all she does. And do you know what they do? They stand on both sides of her, shouting ‘La, la, la, la!’ as loud as they can.”

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