

# Inside a Louisiana abortion clinic as its closure looms: Staff, patients face uncertainty

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BY KATIE GAGLIANO | Staff writer, Katie Gagliano

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As the battle over a woman's right to an abortion is waged in courtrooms and in [demonstrations across the country](#), inside the Hope Medical Group for Women in Shreveport, the conversations are intimate and urgent.

On Tuesday, seven or eight women sat quietly in the softly lit waiting rooms as reruns of sitcoms flickered on wall-mounted TVs. Staff members fielded calls from women whose appointments had been canceled in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* and from others who were calling for the first time.

The Shreveport clinic, one of only [three abortion clinics operating in Louisiana](#), was able to resume abortion procedures Tuesday after Orleans Parish Civil District Judge Robin Giarrusso issued a temporary injunction that stopped the state's abortion trigger law from taking effect.

Hope Medical Group's administrator, Kathaleen Pittman, is a plaintiff in the lawsuit that led to the injunction. A hearing in the case is scheduled for July 8.

In the meantime, Pittman, who's worked at Hope Medical for nearly 30 years, said her clinic is trying to serve as many women as possible.

## 'Stages of grief'

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One of those patients is a 33-year-old Shreveport woman, sitting in the waiting room Tuesday, who said she made the decision to terminate her pregnancy for a combination of financial and health reasons.

Already the mother of a 5-year-old son, she and her fiancé had a long conversation about the pros and cons of having the child — and decided an abortion was the best choice for her as an individual and for their family as a whole. The woman asked that her name not be shared.

After a two-week waiting period, the 33-year-old was able to get in for her initial consultation at Hope Medical Group for Women on June 21.

On Friday, she called to check on her Tuesday appointment with the clinic. It was on hold because of Louisiana's abortion trigger law that kicked in after the Supreme Court's decision. They said to call back in case their lawsuit allowed them to keep her appointment, she said.

The woman said she immediately started crying.

Pittman said many patients, and staff members, had similar reactions — crying in the clinic and on the phone with one another. It was like “the stages of grief” as the women cycled through feelings of denial, devastation and anger.

“They break your heart,” the clinic administrator said.

The patient said her weekend was filled with sleepless nights, anxiety and travel research — [where would she go if her local clinic](#) was no longer available? The Shreveport woman said she's never flown on an airplane; the idea of flying alone to California, Illinois or New Mexico was scary — and expensive.

“It makes no sense to me how in one moment they can change so many people's lives,” she said. “I feel like if you've already made your appointments, you've already gone halfway through the process. At least why can we not have ours and close them out and not take anymore?”

Pittman said some of the women who received abortions Tuesday under shield of the legal injunction were on edge and skeptical that their procedures would move forward.

The patient from Shreveport said when the clinic called to say her appointment could move forward, she thought it might be some kind of sting operation targeting abortion patients and providers.

“I know this is what’s best for me and my family. Why is there such a stigma put on everything? I don’t like all the shame and everything with it,” she said.

Anti-abortion groups demonstrating near the clinic are what prompted 53-year-old Kerry McNamara to begin volunteering there seven years ago. He and other volunteers escort women inside from the parking lot and provide a buffer between any demonstrators and the patients.

As McNamara patrolled the parking lot in his orange vest Tuesday, he said aside from one man, who paced the sidewalk outside the fenced facility, there was no activity. The community college instructor got involved because he’s anti-bullying, he said.

“At the end of your journey to be met by people like this on the sidewalk is just a kick in the gut. I give them a lot of credit, these patients. They’ve got courage,” McNamara said.

## **Health, financial considerations**

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Since having her 5-year-old, the Shreveport patient said she’s known she didn’t want a second child. The first pregnancy was rife with prenatal and birth complications. Now older and with a son to care for, she said she knew she didn’t want to assume that risk again.

She takes hormonal birth control and forgot to take her pill one day. Soon after she was pregnant, she said.

There were financial considerations, she said: rising costs due to inflation, adding a second dependent to her insurance, increasing rent costs, and lack of maternity leave and support for pumping while breastfeeding at her job. With her son, she estimated she paid \$180 per week on a specialty formula because of his poor digestive health. What if she needs to do that again, and the formula isn’t available because of existing shortages?

Pittman said she doesn’t know what options will be available for women if the clinic is forced to close. She and the Hope Medical Group staff are just focusing on the work they can do.

"If I allow myself to sink into misery, then that is going to prevent me from helping women," she said. "I need to be my best self, the staff needs to be their best selves when we are with these women, because they deserve it."

Pittman said the Shreveport clinic has seen an influx of demand from Texas since the state banned abortions after six weeks' gestation in the fall. Their average wait time for an abortion is four to six weeks.

She estimated between 100 and 150 women will be seen through July 8. The number doesn't make a dent in the clinic's waiting list, which is over 400 people, and the administrator said they're attempting to extend clinic hours and add in additional procedure time.

"What's going to happen July 8? No idea," she said.

In her fear and anger, the Shreveport patient said she found some peace in the providers at Hope Medical Group.

"When I saw my counselor when I walked in this morning...I said, 'Can I give you a hug?' because I just wanted to tell her thank you for fighting for us."

*Editor's note: An earlier version of this story spelled Judge Robin Giarrusso's last name as Giarusso. The Acadiana Advocate regrets the error.*