

A Push for Alternatives to Planned Parenthood

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and his GOP-led legislature want to put their health department between Planned Parenthood and the federal funds it gets to provide family planning services in the state.

Walker signed a law in February that requires the state Department of Health Services to apply for federal family planning service funds that are now sent to Planned Parenthood. If the state wins the grant, the law prohibits the department from contracting with providers like Planned Parenthood that also perform abortions.

Wisconsin's law is just one strategy being deployed in some Republican-controlled states to keep taxpayer dollars out of the hands of Planned Parenthood and other providers that offer abortions. Since 2011, states including Arizona, Ohio and Texas have ended Planned Parenthood contracts or created new programs to provide the services it had provided.

Rep. Andre Jacque, a Republican and the lead sponsor of the Wisconsin bill, says having the state become the steward of Title X grants for family planning services would improve the quality of care.

"If [Title X funds] were made available to other community nonprofits that can provide a more expansive variety of services I certainly thought that would be beneficial," Jacque says about the law.

Similar measures are being considered in Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Pennsylvania and South Carolina, according to CQStateTrack data.



THERE WILL BE A WALL: Walker's state health department will try to capture federal funds now going to Planned Parenthood Wisconsin.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott, a Republican, on March 25 signed a bill that diverts from abortion providers federal funds for sex education and testing for sexually transmitted diseases. Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat, vetoed such a measure that was passed by his Republican-controlled legislature.

Supporters of the measures say the federal funds should go to community health clinics that can provide care and screening for chronic illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol instead of those, like Planned Parenthood, that provide only reproductive health services.

Planned Parenthood Wisconsin, the only Title X grantee for the state, receives \$3.5 million annually from the program.

In 2011, the legislature blocked PPWI from receiving money through the Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, a joint state-federal program focused on caring for children and pregnant women. In 2014, the state ended its contract with Planned Parenthood and other abortion providers under the Wisconsin Well

Woman Program for breast and cervical cancer screenings. PPWI has closed five health centers, leaving 3,104 rural area residents without a nearby provider.

While state lawmakers argue that spreading Title X funds across providers would help with care, community health centers are struggling to serve the patients they already have, says Nicole Safar, director of government relations for PPWI.

"We're all operating on razor-thin margins and struggling to meet the need," Safar says. While "\$3.5 million sounds like a lot of money," she adds, "it's not even close to what is necessary to starting up a new health center or continuing to provide access."

She said that in addition to Title X funding, PPWI also receives money from Medicaid and donors. "It's a patchwork of funds that come together to provide this care, and it's not easy to do."

Other nongovernment providers don't apply for the grants, she said, because they can't meet federal and state requirements and because the application process can be costly. DHS officials in Wisconsin estimated

that they'll spend about \$1 million to complete the application.

Even if the state wins the grant, it may have a hard time finding providers. "Currently the department does not have the capacity to support a Title X project," according to a statement from Claire Yunker, deputy communications director for Wisconsin DHS.

The DHS application will have to compete with Planned Parenthood's, but the state may have an advantage because of its size and familiarity with federal grants, says Elizabeth Nash, senior state issues associate for the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive choice advocacy group.

In 23 states, the state health department is the only Title X recipient. In eight states, a Planned Parenthood affiliate and a state health department are the main grant recipients, with the option to share funding with other providers in the state.

Political climate matters. In Southern states, women's health providers that offer abortion services are essentially locked out of Title X funding. That was the case for Planned Parenthood Southeast, which annually serves 17,000 patients in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi.

PPSE used to get about \$400,000 from the Fulton County Health Department in Georgia, but after the funding was pulled in 2011, 2012 and again in 2014, Staci Fox, chief executive for the affiliate, stopped applying for money.

"We've made a decision to not be reliant on those funds in the part of the country where the politics are not supportive of women accessing the health care they need," Fox says. "We don't feel like it's a good business decision to rely on funding that is not secure."

— Marissa Evans