
THE BRONX HEALTH LINK, INC.



**TESTIMONY OF ROBERT LEDERER,
RESEARCHER AND POLICY ANALYSIS FOR
THE BRONX HEALTH LINK, INC.**

**Public Hearing by the City Council Women's Issues Committee on
Proposed Int. No. 826, the Clinic Access Bill
November 18, 2008**

I am the Researcher and Policy Analyst for the Bronx Health Link, Inc., a clearinghouse for members of the health and human service delivery system of the Bronx. We reach over 500 members and agencies that actively participate in an electronic mailing list and numerous workgroups, advisory boards and task forces. Through a contract with the NYS Department of Health, Bureau of Women's Health to operate the Comprehensive Prenatal-Perinatal Services Network and with the NYC Department of Health under the Infant Mortality Reduction Initiative, we work extensively with the community and health care providers to identify gaps in perinatal health care, promote women's early entry into prenatal care, and improve the reproductive health of Bronx women. A major focus of our work is seeking to reduce the Bronx's shamefully high rates – exceeding national rates – of infant mortality, maternal mortality, and percentages of prematurity, low birth weight, teen pregnancy, and late or no prenatal care. In particular, we seek to reach the African American and Latina mothers and babies at greatest risk. We educate women about the importance of prenatal and postpartum medical screening and care, as well as self-care and care of their infants – particularly through the use of workshops and information that empower women to make informed choices.

Our work is grounded in the principle that pregnant women – and indeed all people – have the fundamental human right to make their own fully informed health care decisions and to have access, without obstructions, to the medicine and procedures that they so choose. It is based on that core principle that we strongly endorse Proposed Int. No. 826, the Clinic Access Bill. It is important to strengthen protections under the City's Human Rights Law and the federal Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act so that New York City truly guarantees women the right to obtain reproductive care, and also to protect the right of staff who provide such care to do so without harassment. The bill's restriction on following or harassing anyone within 15 feet of a clinic entrance sharpens current law while carefully protecting the civil liberties of anyone engaging in non-harassing First Amendment activity. In addition, the prohibition on blocking a clinic's entrance or exit, including its parking lots and driveways, is another important extension of current statutes.

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This is not an abstract or theoretical issue. Anti-abortion zealots have mounted intrusive and harassing protests against reproductive health clinics in New York City for years, and those actions continue to this day. Indeed, the so-called “40 Days for Life” campaign is now underway nationwide, including protests at a women’s health clinic in the South Bronx. Over the years in New York City, women seeking care and the staff who serve them have been bullied, stalked, and harassed at numerous locations. This type of conduct is intolerable and must be clearly and unambiguously outlawed.

In addition to constituting a violation of the rights of those attending and staffing such clinics, this behavior also has the dangerous effect of intimidating other women into avoiding the reproductive care they need, thus potentially jeopardizing their health. Some of the clinics that have been targeted not only perform abortions, but also offer a range of OB-GYN and family planning services, including, for example, contraception access and counseling, pregnancy testing, sexually transmitted infection testing and treatment, Pap smears, and other gynecologic services.

In the Bronx alone, women give birth to more than 20,000 babies annually; many others make the choice to terminate their pregnancies. Particularly given the fact that the Bronx has the highest percentages of live births and pregnancy terminations to teenage mothers – of any borough - the City must ensure that there are not additional obstacles placed in the path of these young women’s efforts to obtain care. Women of any age who seek reproductive care should not have to worry about intimidating assaults on their rights as they enter a place of medical care.

In summary, the Bronx Health Link applauds the sponsors of the Clinic Access Bill and urges the Council to act quickly to pass this important protection for the reproductive rights of all women in this city.

Contact information:

Robert Lederer
Researcher and Policy Analyst
The Bronx Health Link
(718) 590-8512
bob@bronxhealthlink.org