

Clinic at epicenter of SCOTUS abortion case stays open

by [Emily Wagster Pettus](#) in the [December 29, 2021](#) issue



Allen Siders, an antiabortion activist, speaks outside the Jackson Women's Health Organization on November 30. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

As the US Supreme Court heard a Mississippi case that could topple abortion rights nationwide, the state's only abortion clinic was busier than ever. Volunteers continued to escort patients into the bright pink building while protesters outside beseeched women not to end their pregnancies.

In recent years, the Jackson Women's Health Organization saw patients two or three days a week. But it has doubled its hours to treat women from Texas, where a law took effect in early September banning most abortions at about six weeks, and from Louisiana, where clinics are filling with Texas patients.

The case being argued before the nation's high court on December 1 was about a 2018 Mississippi law that would ban most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. The state's Republican attorney general is asking the court—remade with three conservative justices nominated by President Trump—to use the case to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the court's 1973 ruling that declared a nationwide right to abortion.

The Supreme Court has never allowed states to ban abortion before viability, the point at roughly 24 weeks when a fetus can survive outside the womb.

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside the court ahead of the arguments, their opposing positions marked by signs that included “Her Body Her Choice” and “God Hates the Shedding of Innocent Blood.”

“I just hope that the Supreme Court holds precedent on what they're supposed to be doing, but my hopes are not that high,” the Mississippi clinic director, Shannon Brewer, said from Washington.

Brewer said she has never been more concerned about abortion rights in the United States than she is now.

She has good reason: the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights, says that if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned or fundamentally weakened, 21 states have laws or constitutional amendments “that would make them certain to attempt to ban abortion as quickly as possible.”

Mississippi is one of the states with an abortion ban that was set before *Roe* and would take effect if that precedent is overturned. In November, Republican governor Tate Reeves spoke at Pray Together for Life, an event hosted by the Family Research Council.

“Abortion is barbaric,” Reeves declared. “Abortion is evil. It's probably the greatest evil of our day.”

Reeves often says he wants to make Mississippi the safest place in America for unborn children. Yet Mississippi has the highest infant mortality rate and one of the highest rates of births to teenage mothers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A Supreme Court decision is likely months away. As both abortion rights and antiabortion activists anxiously wait to see how justices will rule, the clinic will

continue operating.

The clinic—known by supporters as the Pink House—is in Jackson’s eclectic Fondren neighborhood, a short drive from the Mississippi capitol, where legislators have been voting to restrict abortion access for decades. On many days, the clinic is enveloped by a cacophony of noise from bullhorn-wielding protesters outside the black iron fence and clinic escorts who blare rock music inside the perimeter.

The scene was similar the day before SCOTUS heard arguments in the clinic’s case. Keith Dalton, pastor of a nondenominational Christian church, raised his voice at men who had driven women there and told a man who sat in a car in the fenced-off parking lot that he would adopt the couple’s baby.

“Come on, man . . . don’t let your child be killed,” Dalton yelled. Pointing to the clinic where the man’s female companion had gone, he continued: “You want to talk about something that will destroy a relationship? This will destroy your relationship with your girlfriend or fiancée or wife or whatever.”

Tanya Britton, a past president of Pro-Life Mississippi, stepped up and said loudly: “In the name of Jesus—have mercy on your child, have mercy on her or him. God loves you and does not desire this for you or your baby.”

Sharon Lobert, a retired nurse, wears a rainbow-striped clinic escort vest while walking patients from the parking lot into the building. She said she has learned to tune out protesters and her goal is to ensure women are treated with dignity.

“My strategy is to only pay attention when I think I can deflect their harassment away from one particular woman,” Lobert said.

The Mississippi Health Department website has abortion statistics dating back to 1980. The largest number of abortions in a single year since then was 7,574 in 1991. The smallest was 4,272 in 2015. White people received the most abortions until about the mid-1990s, when they were surpassed by Black people.

About 59 percent of Mississippi residents are White, and about 38 percent are Black. During the past five years, about 75 percent of those receiving an abortion in Mississippi were Black and about 21 percent were White. Race was listed as “other” or “unknown” for the rest.

“The right to decide whether or when to have a child is essential for social, economic, and racial equality; reproductive autonomy; and the right to determine our own future,” said Valencia Robinson, executive director of Mississippi in Action, an organization that supports abortion rights and works on other sexual health issues.

“Mississippians know what’s best for them and their families.” —Associated Press