

Texas abortion law could send women across borders

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The Hilltop Women's Reproductive clinic is seen in El Paso, Texas, Monday, Aug. 11, 2014. If the new abortion law, one of the toughest in the nation, is upheld by a federal judge, this center will be forced to close due to new requirements and women will have to travel hundreds of miles or go to New Mexico to obtain an abortion. (AP Photo/Juan Carlos Llorca)

Crossing borders is a part of life in El Paso in far West Texas, where

people may walk into Mexico to visit family or commute to New Mexico for work. But getting an abortion doesn't require leaving town.

That could change if a federal judge upholds new Texas rules that would ban abortions at 18 clinics starting Sept. 1, including the only one that offers the procedure in El Paso.

One of the toughest anti-[abortion](#) laws in the U.S. has come under particular scrutiny at a trial ending Wednesday. Abortion has been a much-debated issue in the U.S. in the decades since the country's top court affirmed a right to the procedure, and several [states](#) have tried to chip away at access under a variety of laws and proposed laws.

The law would leave just seven abortion facilities in Texas, all of which would be in major cities and none in the western half of the nation's second-largest state.

Without any abortion providers in El Paso, [women](#) there would face a 550-mile (885-kilometer) trip to the nearest place in Texas to legally terminate a pregnancy. Attorneys for the state point out that women could simply go to a clinic 15 minutes away in New Mexico.

Opponents of the new rules say New Mexico doesn't require the same new standards that Texas Gov. Rick Perry approved in 2013 in the name of protecting women's health. It also doesn't require the pre-abortion sonograms that Texas began mandating in 2012.

"It's hypocritical to say they want to protect women, to say that they want women to have a safe abortion and then take away the clinics and make the women go to another state," said Gerri Laster, who ran what had been a second abortion clinic in El Paso before it closed in June because of other new mandates.



The Women's Reproductive clinic is seen in Santa Teresa, New Mexico, Monday, Aug. 11, 2014. If the new abortion law, one of the toughest in the nation, is upheld by a federal judge, the only remaining abortion clinic in El Paso, across the state border from Santa Teresa, will be forced to close due to new requirements and women will have to travel hundreds of miles or go to New Mexico to obtain an abortion. (AP Photo/Juan Carlos Llorca)

U.S. District Judge Lee Yeakel is not expected to immediately issue a ruling after closing arguments Wednesday.

The seven facilities that will remain in Texas already have operating rooms, sterile ventilation systems and other hospital-style standards that abortion providers are required to meet under the new law. Outraged abortion clinic owners say they can't afford to make those upgrades,

which they criticize as unnecessary.

Texas is proposing that New Mexico is an option for El Paso women, even after a [federal judge](#) in Mississippi ruled last month that a state can't shift obligations on constitutional rights—in this case, abortion access—to its neighbors. Texas says its situation isn't comparable to Mississippi because, unlike there, the law wouldn't remove all abortion services in the state.

"At most, some patients may choose to travel out of state for convenience," the state wrote in court documents.

The company behind the remaining clinic in El Paso, Hilltop Women's Reproductive Clinic, also owns the one minutes away in New Mexico. Gloria Martinez, the administrative nurse at the El Paso clinic, said that office will say open and simply refer women across state lines for the procedure.

Nearly 2,200 abortions were performed in El Paso in 2011—about 3.1 percent of all abortions in Texas that year. State attorneys pointed that out in court while making the case that nearly 9 of every 10 women in Texas will still live within 150 miles of an abortion provider.

Laster said closing her clinic, Reproductive Services El Paso, removed the city's only abortion provider that gave women financial assistance for a procedure that costs around \$530. Abortion providers say if they're lucky, the border women choose to cross will be into New Mexico—and not into Mexico to buy drugs that allow them to undergo dangerous self-abortions.

"It's not as easy as the Legislature makes it look," Laster said.

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