

Minnesota moving to fortify state status as abortion refuge

March 21 2023, by Steve Karnowski



Democratic Minnesota state Rep. Esther Agbaje speaks at a news conference ahead of a vote on her bill in the Minnesota State Capitol on Monday, March 20, 2023, in St. Paul, Minn. The state House passed the bill by a 68-62 vote to prohibit enforcement in Minnesota of laws, subpoenas, judgements or extradition requests from other states against people who get, perform or assist with abortions in Minnesota. Credit: AP Photo/Steve Karnowski

Minnesota is moving to fortify its status as a refuge for patients from restrictive states who travel to the state to seek abortions—and to protect providers who serve them.

The state House on Monday passed a [bill](#) by a 68-62 vote to prohibit enforcement in Minnesota of laws, subpoenas, judgements or extradition requests from other states against people who get, perform or assist with abortions in Minnesota. The Senate version passed its first committee test last week.

The House lead author, Democratic Rep. Esther Agbaje, of Minneapolis, said at a news conference before the debate that a prime example of what supporters are worried about is a Texas law that deputizes individuals to enforce their state's strict restrictions by allowing them to sue to anyone who helps a patient obtain an [abortion](#) elsewhere.

Democratic House Majority Leader Jamie Long, of Minneapolis, said the bill is needed because Texas-style legislation has been introduced in several states that could put Minnesota providers at risk, as well as residents who might help relatives or friends who come to Minnesota for abortions just by picking them up at the airport.

"Before the Dobbs decision last summer, I'd often care for patients from nearby states like the Dakotas or Wisconsin," said Dr. Sarah Trexler, chief medical officer at Planned Parenthood North Central States, which performs 70% of the abortions in Minnesota. "But now, for the first time ever, I regularly care for patients from Texas, Alabama, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and the list goes on and on."

Like Planned Parenthood and other providers, Whole Woman's Health of Minnesota in Bloomington has also seen a sharp increase in patients from out-of-state, more than doubling from 2019 to 26% in 2022.

"The most remarkable change has come from Texas, where we only saw 2 patients from that state in 2019 to 96 from February 2022 to March of 2023," Amy Hagstrom Miller, president and CEO of Whole Woman's Health Alliance, said in an email.



Abortion rights supporters gather outside the House Chamber in the Minnesota State Capitol on Monday, March 20, 2023, in St. Paul, Minn. The state is moving to fortify its status as a refuge for patients from restrictive states who travel to the state to seek abortions — and to protect providers who serve them. Credit: AP Photo/Steve Karnowski

Democrats made have abortion rights one of their top priorities for Minnesota's 2023 legislative session. They won a one-seat majority in

the state Senate in the November elections while maintaining a wider hold on the House to wind up with pro-choice majorities in both chambers. Democratic Gov. Tim Walz signed a fast-tracked bill in January to enshrine in state statutes abortion rights that had been protected under a 1995 Minnesota Supreme Court decision.

Texas and Oklahoma allow private citizens to sue people they believe have helped someone get an abortion. Minnesota has already adopted some protections that apply to those people under an executive order that Walz signed last June. And Democratic Attorney General Keith Ellison pledged that his office wouldn't cooperate with other states seeking to prosecute women who come to Minnesota for abortions. Several other states, including California and Colorado have also adopted safe haven protections for patients traveling to seek abortions, either by executive order or by statute.

A more contentious bill working its way through the Minnesota House and Senate would repeal a long list of state statutes restricting abortion rights—such as 24-hour waiting period and parental notification requirements—that a district judge declared unconstitutional last July. It's meant to ensure that appellate courts can't restore those restrictions.

Long demurred on when that bill might come up for a House floor vote. Asked if supporters now have the votes to pass it, he replied, "We'll have the votes when we bring it to the floor."

Republican critics of the various bills argue they've already left Minnesota with essentially no restrictions on abortion at all—at any stage of pregnancy. But their efforts to scale back the legislation and maintain some limits have all failed. Republican Rep. Peggy Scott, of Andover, said the bill passed Monday will give Minnesota a "black eye" by making it a destination and sanctuary for people seeking to end their pregnancies.

"We are going to reward breaking the law, we are going to reward behavior that leads to felony convictions in other states. We're going to say, 'Come to Minnesota, we'll have you, we'll take you,'" GOP Rep. Anne Neu Brindley said during the debate. "Folks, it's wrong."

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