

# California pushes to expand the universe of abortion care providers

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California's efforts to expand access to abortion care are enabling more types of medical practitioners to perform certain abortion proceduresâ&#128;"potentially a boon for patients in rural areas especially, but a source of concern for doctors' groups that have long fought efforts to expand the role of non-physicians.

The latest move is a law that enables trained [physician assistants](#), also known as physician associates, to perform first-trimester abortions without a supervising physician present. The measure, which passed last year and took effect Jan. 1, also lets PAs who have been disciplined or convicted solely for performing an abortion in a state where the practice is restricted apply for a license in California.

Physician assistants are now on par with [nurse practitioners](#) and certified nurse midwives trained in abortion care, who in 2022 won the ability to perform abortions without a doctor present.

The need for more abortion care practitioners is being driven by efforts in many states to gut abortion rights following the Supreme Court's 2022 decision ending constitutional protection for the procedure. Thirty-one states have implemented abortion restrictions that range from cutting [federal funding](#) for abortion coverage to outright bans, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization concerned with reproductive health.

With the new law, "there will be fewer barriers, and shorter wait times for this essential service," said Jeremy Meis, president-elect of the California Academy of Physician Associates. While it is unclear how many of California's 16,000 PAs will be trained in performing abortions, research shows that PAs are more likely than physicians to practice in [rural areas](#) where access to abortion is limited. More than 40% of

counties in California lack clinics that provide abortion.

Comparing data from the first six months of 2020 with the same period in 2023, the number of abortions jumped from 77,030 to 92,600 a 20% increase as the state became a refuge for women seeking abortions. California has passed a suite of [reproductive health](#) laws to build in protections and increase access, and a dozen other states, including Oregon, Minnesota, and New York, have mounted similar efforts. Seventeen states, including California, now allow PAs to perform first-trimester abortions, according to the American Academy of Physician Associates.

There was little opposition to the new California law, with two physicians' groups supporting it. But the American Medical Association, the country's most powerful doctors' lobby, has fought vigorously against what it calls "scope creep"—that is, changes that allow clinicians like PAs to do medical procedures independent of physicians.

"Our policy stance is the same on scope of practice expansion regardless of procedure," noted Kelly Jakubek, the AMA's media relations manager. The AMA's website points to legislative victories in 2023, including striking down "legislation allowing physician assistants to practice independently without physician oversight," in states including Arizona and New York. The AMA did not take a formal position on the California legislation. Its local chapter, the California Medical Association, took a neutral position on the legislation.

In preparation for the new law, one physician assistant at Planned Parenthood Pasadena & San Gabriel Valley began learning how to perform aspiration abortions—a procedure also known as dilation and curettage that uses gentle suction to end a pregnancy—at the end of last year.

The PA, who requested anonymity due to concerns about safety, said that with abortion restrictions in place around the country, "I just think it's really important to be able to provide a comfortable, safe, and very effective way to terminate a pregnancy for patients."

She is now one of six PAs and midwives at her clinic who can offer aspiration abortions. To reach competency, she participated in 50 procedures and learned how to administer medication that eases pain and anxiety. Such conscious sedation, as it is known, is frequently used for first-trimester abortions. Now she, like any other advanced practice clinician who has obtained skills in performing abortions, can train her peersâ€;"another feature of the new law.

The length of time for training and the number of procedures to reach competency varies based on a practitioner's previous experience.

"It's encouraging this cross-profession training and collaborations, which is really important when we're looking at increasing access to essential services," said Jessica Dieseldorff, senior program manager of abortion services at Planned Parenthood Mar Monte in Santa Cruz.

In December, California committed \$18 million to help accelerate training in abortion and reproductive care for practitioners, including PAs, through the Reproductive Health Care Access Initiative.

Dieseldorff, a nurse practitioner who trains other advanced-practice clinicians in [abortion care](#), said that rural communities, in particular, will reap the benefits since many rely solely on physician assistants and other allied clinicians.

Reflecting on her career, she said much has changed since she became a nurse 25 years ago. At that time, she worked only as support staff to doctors providing abortions.

"When I began, medication abortions did not exist in this country," she said, referring to the practice of using two drugs often prescribed to induce abortions. "It's been gratifying to be able to progress and become a provider myself, provide non-stigmatizing and compassionate and safe care to patients; and now, at this stage in my career to be training others to do the same."

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