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Greater Columbus Right to Life Opposes Proposed City Ordinance

(COLUMBUS, OH) –Columbus City Councilwoman Elizabeth Brown has recently introduced a [change to Columbus' City Code](#) that would, among other things, make it illegal to be within 15 feet of the property of a “reproductive health center” when your presence there is inconvenient or annoying. The penalty for a violation of this law? Up to one year in jail and a \$1000 fine.

True, the proposal contains other prohibitions – for example it is illegal to block access to the clinic, to strike, grab, shove, restrain, etc., someone making their way into the clinic, and to threaten to do any of those things as well. However, each of these is already an illegal act at the local, state, or federal level. For example, blocking access to an abortion clinic, threatening or injuring a patient or employee of a clinic, or vandalizing the structure of an abortion clinic is a violation of the [1994 FACE Act](#), carrying criminal and civil penalties of tens of thousands of dollars and six months to three years' incarceration. Assault carries a higher penalty at the [state level](#), and the same penalty under city code. [Vandalism](#), [kidnapping](#), [abduction](#), and [extortion](#) are all also already illegal.

While Councilwoman Brown cites an increase in police calls near “reproductive health centers” in the last year, specifically that 38 police calls were made to their vicinity in 2015, as the justification for her proposal, there have not been numerous citations and prosecutions of pro-life advocates. In fact, when a woman – who was not reported as having any ties to local pro-life organizations, broke into and vandalized the Planned Parenthood abortion clinic on East Main Street, she [was identified, apprehended, and charged within a matter of weeks](#) – illustrating that the existing laws are sufficient to protect against actual crimes.

Greater Columbus Right to Life, a central Ohio prolife education and grassroots advocacy organization representing hundreds of volunteers and 2500 Central Ohio households opposes the measure and has issued the following statement, which can be attributed to executive director Beth Vanderkooi:

“This law attempts to create a round-about way of stopping the prayerful, peaceful, and effective work of pro-life advocates at abortion clinics. It is worth noting that since the Greater Columbus Right to Life sidewalk counseling program was implemented, abortion rates have dramatically declined in central Ohio – by nearly twice the statewide average.”

“Councilwoman Brown’s proposal repackages existing ordinances with a novel and unconstitutional concept of harassment – defined as something which annoys or inconveniences another within fifteen feet of an abortion clinic.”

“The Ohio and US Constitutions guarantee our basic rights to free speech, religious expression, peaceable assembly, and freedoms of conscience. While not without any limitations, these rights cannot be restricted on the arbitrary and insubstantial basis of what might annoy or inconvenience another – the threshold of which could fluctuate from day to day and person to person. Columbus Police and public safety officials should use their time to address the serious crimes in our community: substance abuse, theft, assault, human trafficking, and the dozens of other crimes that seriously plague the neighborhoods of Columbus abortion clinics.”

“We are calling on Columbus Council to immediately and permanently reject this ordinance. Should it be enacted, we will take every legal step necessary to protect our thousands of volunteers from such arbitrary, unconstitutional, and inane efforts to restrict our freedoms of speech, association, and religious rights of conscience.”

For more background on why we oppose this proposal, you can visit our letter to supporters [online](#).

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