

## Bill would increase punishment for violence against abortion doctors, clinic employees and patients



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A bill sponsored by Assemblyman Sam Hoyt that would create the crime of aggravated interference with health care services in the first and second degrees passed the Assembly June 22 and was referred to the Senate Rules Committee.

If the bill (A.8924) becomes law, causing physical injury to someone who is obtaining, providing or assisting someone to obtain or provide reproductive health services would be a new Class E felony, and causing serious physical injury would be a new Class C felony. Repeat offenders would be subject to escalated penalties.

"The employees and volunteers who provide reproductive health services face violent rhetoric and threats far too often," Hoyt said. "Recently, Dr. George Tiller was murdered in Kansas after suffering years of intimidation. Dr. Barnett Slepian's murder in Buffalo in 1998 is another example of this extremist violence. We cannot allow the violent acts of a few individuals prevent women from receiving medical services they are legally entitled to receive. This bill shows that New York state is serious about protecting our health care workers," said Hoyt, D-Grand Island.

Hoyt, in his bill justification, cites the murder of two other doctors, clinic escorts, security guards and receptionists also killed by anti-abortion activists. More common though are incidents of intimidation outside abortion clinics by activists who try to prevent patients and workers from entering.

"During this time when nationally our leaders are looking for common ground on this debate, it is welcoming to know that New York state is committed to protecting reproductive health care providers, staff, volunteers and patients and the choices they make," said M. Tracey Brooks, president and CEO of Family Planning Advocates of New York State. "We're very appreciative of Assemblyman Hoyt for spearheading this important effort."

Specifically, the bill would create a new Class E felony (aggravated interference with health care services in the second degree) to cause physical injury to someone who is obtaining, providing or assisting someone to obtain or provide reproductive health services. Causing physical injury is typically a Class A misdemeanor. It would also create a new Class C felony (aggravated interference with health care services in the first degree) to cause serious physical injury to someone who is obtaining, providing, or assisting someone to obtain or provide reproductive health services. Causing serious physical injury is typically a Class D felony.

And for the first time, the legislation would make it a crime to cause such physical injury and serious physical injury to volunteers who are assisting others to obtain or provide reproductive health care services rather than just the actual provider of those services.

Hoyt stressed that the law would not punish peaceful protesters outside abortion clinics. "In no way does this legislation interfere with the free speech rights of peaceful demonstrators," Hoyt said. "Its purpose is to penalize criminal, violent conduct that causes injury."

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