

Bill that would tighten abortion clinic regulations stalls

A bill that would more tightly regulate Maryland abortion clinics appears stalled in the General Assembly. Lawmakers are instead relying on the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to review how clinics are regulated.

“Everything we’re hearing from both the House of Delegates and the Senate is that (the bill) is not going to move,” said Nancy Paltell, associate director for the respect for life department of the Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC). “Everyone is saying we don’t need bills, let’s just give the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene the chance to write the regs and everything will be fine.”

Paltell was apprehensive about that approach. She noted that for 18 years, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has not acted on providing better regulations. In that time, women have died or have suffered serious injuries while undergoing abortions at clinics that are currently regulated only as doctors’ offices. The bill supported by the MCC would regulate clinics as ambulatory surgical centers.

Paltell said she is “very concerned” about what new regulations would consist of if they are defined by the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

“Are they going to be so weak that they don’t protect anyone?” she asked.

Stephanie White, a Baltimore woman whose daughter died during an abortion when she received an overdose of anesthesia, is strongly encouraging lawmakers to approve the bill. She and Paltell recently met with 10 senators and lobbied them on the issue.

“I’m telling everyone on Facebook and Twitter to call their senators and delegates to keep this bill alive,” White said.

If lawmakers refuse to enact the bill, White said she wants Paltell to be involved in discussions with health and hygiene officials as they consider new regulations.

Paltell said she has yet to receive an invitation.

“I’ve been asking everyone that Nancy be on board,” White said, “to keep them accountable.”

White, who supports keeping abortion legal, rejected claims by bill opponents that the bill is a “sneaky” way of closing abortion clinics.

“There’s nothing in this bill about closing abortion clinics,” she said, “it’s about regulating them.”

Charles County Sen. Thomas Middleton, chairman of Finance Committee where the Senate bill is languishing, did not respond to requests for an interview with The Catholic Review. Paltell said Middleton had invited her to meet with him to discuss the issue.