News



04.13.2018

A woman prays the rosary in 2012 outside the Marie Stopes clinic in London. Members of Ealing Council, in the west of the capital, voted April 10 to establish a buffer zone around a Maria Stopes clinic, banning public prayer and offers of assistance to women within 100 meters of the building. (CNS/Olivia Harris, Reuters)

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London — April 13, 2018
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A municipal council in a West London suburb voted this week to allow a buffer zone around an abortion clinic — the first such zone of its kind in Britain, where abortion has been legal for 50 years.

The move has buoyed abortion-rights supporters, who are looking for the creation of more such zones around the nation. But it troubles abortion opponents and others who say it violates their free speech rights.

The debate, while relatively new to Britain, has a long history in the United States, where cities and states have taken varied approaches to the zones. They have been tested in several courts, and then in the Supreme Court in 2014, which declared them presumptively illegal.

In Ealing, the suburb where the 100-meter zone will be established, the clinic run by Marie Stopes International charity for more than 20 years had long served its clients without much protest. On most days, the only people who used to pass its door were commuters traveling to the nearby train station or dog walkers heading for the adjoining park.

Vigils outside the clinic used to consist of a few people on the weekend praying silently and saying the rosary. Some would also hand out leaflets to women arriving for abortions, offering to help them if they chose to continue their pregnancy.

But in the last few years the area in front of the clinic has become a culture war battleground.

Those praying and quietly offering assistance are still there. But noisier anti-abortion protesters with signs showing fetuses have staked out space outside the clinic. Also,

more recently, groups of abortion-rights activists have added their — often equally loud voices — to the din outside the clinic.

Clare McCullough, of the Catholic organization Good Counsel Network, said the atmosphere between the rival factions has deteriorated in the past year.

“I thought at first there could be respect on either side about different points of view but instead it has become very aggressive. Sometimes they have snatched our posters.”

Meanwhile, the clinic says it has a log of its patients’ complaints about being told by protesters that God will punish them and protesters calling them “mum.”

McCullough denies her group has engaged in aggressive activity. She says offering help to women has led to 500 of them in the past five years changing their minds and not pursuing abortions at the Ealing clinic.

The abortion-rights group that demonstrates outside the clinic, Sister Supporter, has said that it is not anti-religion but that its opposition to abortion protesters “includes religious groups conducting prayer vigils in the immediate vicinity.”

When the zone is in place, anybody who breaches it will be liable for a 100-pound fine — about $145 — a penalty that, if not paid by a deadline, can rise tenfold.

Before Ealing’s council voted for the zone, it queried residents about the activity outside the clinic. Responses were varied: Some worried about the harassment of clients, others that those clients weren’t given alternatives to abortion and still others that a buffer zone would stifle free expression of religious beliefs.

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The council reported that most people who wrote to them said they had witnessed intimidation and supported the zone.

The British government is undertaking a review of protests outside abortion clinics by gathering evidence from law enforcement, health care providers and municipal councils to understand the scale and nature of these protests, as well as to hear

from others such as rights groups worried about the free speech implications of the zones. It could then take action such as creating new police powers to protect those using or working in abortion clinics.

Although Britain has universal public health care, which includes abortion services, the majority of abortions in the U.K., especially early-term ones, are carried out by private clinics.

Marie Stopes International, named after a British sexual health pioneer, describes itself as the leading independent U.K. provider of sexual and reproductive health services. Its income in the last financial year was the equivalent of about $412 million.