

Putting Young People in Danger: The Illinois Parental Notification of Abortion (PNA) Law and the COVID-19 Crisis



The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed the status quo for virtually every person in the U.S. One way these significant disturbances have affected residents of Illinois is by making access to reproductive health care more difficult. This is especially true for young people, due to the Illinois Parental Notification of Abortion (PNA) law. This law requires that a parent, grandparent, step-parent living in the home, or legal guardian be notified before someone under age 18 has an abortion. Young people who cannot tell one of these adult family members about their abortion must seek a waiver from a judge in a process called "judicial bypass." Forced parental involvement and judicial bypass create barriers to health care and undermine young people's ability to make important decisions about their health and lives. COVID-19 has only exacerbated these harmful effects.

COVID-19 Affects Pregnant People

According to the CDC, "pregnant people have had a higher risk of severe illness when infected with viruses from the same family as COVID-19 and other viral respiratory infections, such as influenza."¹ If a person is seeking to end a pregnancy, unnecessary barriers to abortion expose them to these potentially higher risks.

Parental Interference

According to a qualitative study (Hasselbacher et al., 2014), youth may choose to exclude a parent when seeking an abortion to "protect their relationship with their parent, protect themselves from personally harmful outcomes, and preserve their ability to make a decision for themselves."² Youth, especially youth with intersecting identities, fear detachment, homelessness, and abuse. These harmful outcomes are heightened during a pandemic, which forces youth to stay at home with family members who may not support their decision.

Burden of Judicial Bypass During COVID-19 and Shelter-in-Place

The COVID-19 crisis increases the burdens for young people who need to pursue judicial bypass. Attending a remote hearing with a judge over video-conference is challenging for many young people, especially those who do not have internet or smartphone access. Young people who feel unsafe discussing sensitive matters at home where they may be overheard will struggle to get out of the house because of shelter-in-place restrictions. Repealing PNA is important because youth need accessible and confidential abortion care, not the unnecessary barriers of navigating judicial bypass, right now.³

Anti-Abortion Protestors

The COVID-19 crisis has not stopped anti-abortion protestors from congregating outside of clinics, despite health warnings.⁴ These protestors pose a health risk to health care providers and patients and increase anxiety and panic during this pandemic.⁵ Repealing PNA would remove at least one of the unnecessary and anxiety-provoking obstacles facing young people who need abortion care.

Illinois policy should uphold Governor Pritzker's declaration that reproductive health care is an essential service for people of every age, including young people.⁶

COVID-19 is creating additional barriers to obtaining safe and timely abortion care. Abortion is time-sensitive and there is consensus among medical and health organizations in the U.S. and globally that access to abortion care continues to be essential during the COVID-19 crisis. The lack of adequate reproductive health services can have profound impacts, including financial insecurity, increased risk of family violence, and negative health effects. These impacts are disproportionately felt by marginalized communities in the U.S. who have long faced systemic barriers to health care.

- ¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html>
- ² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4202942/>
- ³ <https://www.ifwhenhow.org/get-involved/strategic-initiatives-2/eliminating-barriers-young-people-abortion/>
- ⁴ https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5dm4ed/anti-abortion-groups-are-still-holding-protests-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak
- ⁵ <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/abortion-clinics-pandemic-boosts-demand-heightens-stress/2255023/>
- ⁶ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6816325-EO-2020-10.html>