

Anti-abortion activist convicted for blockading a reproductive health clinic, not for praying there

APapnews.com/article/fact-check-paulette-harlow-abortion-clinic-praying-prison-839402959778

By MELISSA GOLDIN

June 5, 2024



FILE - The Justice Department in Washington, Nov. 18, 2022. Social media users are falsely claiming an anti-abortion activist was given prison time for praying outside a reproductive health clinic. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File)

CLAIM: A 75-year-old woman named Paulette Harlow was sentenced to two years in prison for praying outside an abortion clinic in Washington.

AP'S ASSESSMENT: False. Harlow was convicted in August 2023 of federal civil rights offenses for her role in the October 2020 invasion and blockade of the Washington Surgi-Clinic. Along with other anti-abortion activists, Harlow used force and physical obstruction to execute the blockade, according to the Department of Justice. She was sentenced to 24 months in prison on Friday.

THE FACTS: Social media users are misrepresenting Harlow's crimes, alleging that she is being put behind bars because she chose to pray beside the clinic.

“A DC judge just sentenced 75-year-old Paulette Harlow, who is in poor health, to 2 years in prison for praying outside an abortion clinic,” reads one X post that had received approximately 15,000 likes and 9,800 shares as of Wednesday. “Her husband fears she might die there.”

An Instagram post that shared a screenshot of the X post states: “The justice system has been broken for a long time and needs a f---ing overhaul. It’s not going to happen overnight but it NEEDS to happen.”

The post, which received more than 3,800 likes, also referenced former President Donald Trump’s conviction on 34 felony counts last week. “Stop saying ‘if’ they can do it to Trump, they can do it to you,” it reads. “They already ARE doing it to you.”

But Harlow, who is named in court documents as Paula “Paulette” Harlow, isn’t getting prison time for praying outside the clinic.

The 75-year-old was sentenced to two years behind bars after being convicted on two charges for taking part in the blockade of the Washington Surgi-Clinic: felony conspiracy against civil rights and violating the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, more commonly known as the FACE Act.

Enacted in 1994, the federal FACE Act prohibits physically obstructing or using the threat of force to intimidate or interfere with a person seeking reproductive health services. The law also prohibits damaging property at abortion clinics and other reproductive health centers.

Harlow was charged alongside nine co-conspirators, including the blockade’s leaders, Lauren Handy and Jonathan Darnel. She was the last to be sentenced. All but one of the defendants were found guilty on the same charges as Harlow. The other pleaded guilty to violating the FACE Act. Handy and Darnel were sentenced to the most prison time, 57 months and 34 months, respectively. The rest received sentences ranging from 10 to 27 months.

“These 10 defendants have been held accountable for using force, threatening to use force and physically obstructing access to reproductive health care in the District of Columbia,” Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division said in a statement.

Martin Cannon, one of the defendants’ attorneys, said in a statement responding to Handy’s sentencing on May 14 that she and her co-defendants were united in non-violence and that “they conspired to be peaceful.”

This is part of the AP’s effort to address widely shared false and misleading information that is circulating online. Learn more about fact-checking at AP.