

Testimony of Renee Chelian for the House Judiciary Committee
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My name is Renee Chelian, and I am the Founder and CEO of Northland Family Planning Centers in Michigan. I have been an abortion provider for more than 50 years, operating three clinics in Southeast Michigan. In all that time, anti-abortion extremists have harmed, violated, and harassed my staff, my patients, my family, and me. Together, over the past six decades, we have faced constant threats of violence including multiple arson attempts, large blockades, a chemical bomb, bomb threats, and even death threats.

Prior to passage of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances, or FACE Act, my clinics were often targeted by a group called Operation Rescue, an anti-abortion organization that staged violent blockades outside of clinics throughout the U.S. Before the FACE Act protections were in place, our doors were blocked by three to four hundred people once a month for more than two and a half years. Clinic staff and I were routinely pricked by safety pins and other unidentified objects and deviously pinched on our legs and buttocks by the extremists outside of my clinics as we tried to walk over or around them to enter the building or escort patients in. We were never successful in entering the clinic and, by the end of the day, my legs were black and blue.

During this time, my husband and I were incredibly fearful for our safety at home as well. We shielded our children from the news and instructed our babysitter to take extra precautions while we were away. Unfortunately, my children still picked up on the threat of violence against their family: at seven years old, my youngest daughter asked for her windows to be bricked up so that “the bad people couldn’t get in and kill us.” My children refused to play outside unless we were right there with them. It was heartbreaking to watch my daughters live in fear.

My own personal experience with clinic violence inspired my advocacy. I was proud to be part of a group that lobbied then-Attorney General Janet Reno to pass the FACE Act in 1993. Once the law went into effect, the violent blockades immediately stopped. We still had protesters, but they were not physically attacking our clinics, staff, and patients. This all ended when President Trump took office for his first term, emboldening extremists to resume their attacks.

In September 2017, I experienced the first Red Rose Rescue at my Sterling Heights clinic. One person created a diversion for security while others rushed to get inside the clinic door. Then, they spread out and sat next to different people in the lobby, invading their personal space and attempting to give them red roses while lecturing patients about their decision despite being asked to leave them alone. As a result, the clinic was shut down for many hours—critical hours that should have been spent providing life-saving health care—because we could not operate

amidst an ongoing security incident. In spite of warnings of trespass, they refused to leave, went limp, and the police had to carry each person, one at a time, out of the clinic to a police car.

In April 2022, my clinic in Southfield experienced yet another Red Rose invasion. Fortunately, we at Northland have built a working and trusting relationship with the local police, and officers were able to remove all of the violent invaders. However, after a warning of trespass and asking them to leave, the police ultimately were forced to use a wheelchair because all of the extremists went limp and refused to move on their own. While the local prosecutor brought trespassing and other criminal charges against the offenders, the perpetrators tried to cite “defense of others” as their criminal defense. Ultimately, this case went all the way up to the Michigan Supreme Court. The court refused to allow “defense of others” to be used and, after the trial, all were found guilty and sentenced to time in jail.

Perhaps the most dangerous and appalling episode of clinic violence that I have experienced since the FACE Act became law took place in August 2020. Our Sterling Heights clinic was blockaded by extremists who prevented me and other staff from entering the clinic. Patients were stuck in their cars, including three women who were coming in for abortions following the detection of fatal fetal anomalies. One woman was actively losing amniotic fluid and was scheduled for the second day of a two-day procedure. She needed immediate medical care. She huddled with her mother and her husband, trapped in the parking lot, while extremists plastered signs of fake fetuses on her car windows and shouted “God loves you, God loves your baby.” The woman cried out, “I know God loves me, I know God loves my baby, but my baby is dying.” Her baby was missing most of its brain and had no kidneys. This woman later shared her powerful testimony at trial.

During the blockade, extremists live-streamed the attack. Although they were eventually arrested, officers allowed the perpetrators to continue streaming on the drive to the jail and even within the jail itself. The video was used as evidence by the Department of Justice to convict eight attackers for violating the FACE Act and on charges of conspiracy. The staff, patients and I all experienced some form of trauma. Some sought mental health treatment.

It’s no exaggeration to say that this trial was the most brutal and emotionally taxing situation that I’ve ever faced. There were six months of pre-trial motions, forcing all those involved to repeatedly relive this trauma. I attended almost every hearing and each day of the trial because I owed it to everyone hurt by the blockade to see it through. I required an FBI escort to and from the courtroom for my own personal safety.

The jury only needed a few hours to deliver their “guilty” verdict convicting the perpetrators in August 2024. Nevertheless, the judge postponed sentencing until after the presidential election. After everything our staff, our patients, and I went through, the effort was all for nothing: A few

months later, on January 24th, 2025, President Trump officially pardoned the violent offenders who attacked our clinic. This left us reliving our trauma and feeling abandoned by the government that is supposed to protect us.

Reproductive health clinics like ours continue to confront a pattern of sustained and consistent violence and harassment. We need more federal protections right now. The FACE Act has been instrumental in holding these violent criminals accountable for their actions. At minimum, the Trump administration must enforce the law to its fullest extent, and it is the responsibility of lawmakers like you to ensure they will.

If the FACE Act is repealed, the episodes of violence, blockades, and bomb and death threats will escalate as these are all crimes covered under FACE. If the FACE Act is repealed, we will return to the 1970s and 1980s, only worse as these extremists are now more emboldened than ever.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and to advocate on behalf of all our patients, staff, and dedicated community, and on behalf of my own family.