



New Jersey Law Raises Concerns Over Prayer Outside Abortion Clinics

New Jersey Governor Mikie Sherrill last week signed a law expanding shield protections for abortion clinics and practitioners of so-called gender-affirming care while creating a new crime of “interference with reproductive health care services.” The measure shields New Jersey providers and patients from certain out-of-state investigations and makes it a crime to injure, threaten, intimidate, or physically obstruct people seeking or providing such services, or to damage property. Penalties start at a fourth-degree crime (up to 18 months in prison) and rise with injury; civil lawsuits are also authorized.



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Subjective Terms

Pro-life groups, including New Jersey Right to Life, condemned the law. They argue that subjective terms such as “intimidate” and “threaten” — which can depend on a reasonable person’s apprehension of harm or an individual’s claimed feelings — risk criminalizing peaceful sidewalk counseling, prayer, sign-holding, or offers of alternatives such as adoption. Defenders, including the governor’s office, maintain that the statute targets purposeful interference with access rather than free speech.

Selective Protection

A central feature of the law is its specialized character. No ordinary commercial businesses receive comparable statutory protection from First Amendment-protected protesting. Under federal law, the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act already confers upon abortion clinics a force-field shielding them from the U.S. Constitution (exempting them from the enshrined right of the people to be able to protest). New Jersey’s S2260 builds on and expands that model within the state. Ordinary businesses rely only on general tools available to everyone: private-property rules, trespass statutes, disorderly conduct laws, noise ordinances, and civil claims. They do not enjoy a dedicated criminal statute elevating “intimidation” of customers or staff in the same way.

Around the World

Comparable buffer-zone and access laws are cropping up elsewhere. In England and Wales, 150-meter “safe access zones” around abortion clinics have been in force since October 2024. These make it an offense to intentionally influence a person’s decision to use services, obstruct access, or cause alarm or distress. Guidance indicates silent prayer and vigils can fall within the prohibition. Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland enacted similar rules at the same time. And multiple Australian states and several Canadian provinces maintain comparable buffer or access zones that restrict protesting, counseling, or leafleting near clinics.



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on August 28, 2026

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