



March 30, 2020

The Honorable Governor Gretchen Whitmer  
P.O. Box 30013  
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Governor Whitmer,

Thank you for your thoughtful leadership in Michigan as we all navigate this stressful and difficult time. I write today to ask you to reconsider the religious exemption to your “Stay Home, Stay Safe” Order. As a faith leader myself, I deeply understand and empathize with the impulse of the faithful to gather together in this moment. Unfortunately, anti-abortion extremists are exploiting your good-faith efforts and using it as an excuse to harass abortion providers and their patients. We cannot allow these protesters to intentionally put patients, providers, and their communities at risk through their flagrant refusal to heed the guidance of our nation’s best medical experts.

The National Abortion Federation (NAF) is the professional association of abortion providers. Our mission is to unite, represent, serve, and support abortion providers in delivering patient-centered, evidence-based care. Our member facilities care for approximately half of the people who choose abortion in the United States and Canada each year, including patients in Michigan. Each year, NAF collects data from our members on the incidences of violence and disruption they have experienced. The current political climate has emboldened anti-abortion individuals in their efforts to disrupt services and intimidate patients and providers. NAF’s *2018 Violence and Disruption Statistics* show an escalation in many forms of harassment, including vandalism, trespassing, obstruction, hate mail, harassing phone calls, and online hate speech.<sup>1</sup> Now, rather than responsibly staying home, protesters have seized on the onset of COVID-19 as an opportunity to further harass and endanger abortion providers and their patients, exploiting this already-fraught national emergency for their own anti-abortion agenda.

NAF has received reports of large gatherings of protesters outside of our Michigan member clinics, even as COVID-19 tears through our communities and people everywhere are staying home for both their own protection and for the greater good. These protesters have used the guise of holding “worship services” to gather outside clinics, needlessly increasing the risk of exposure to and transmission of COVID-19, both among each other and to health care providers and the patients they serve. Elsewhere across the country, there have been reports of protesters intentionally coughing on clinic escorts and making physical contact with patients and providers attempting to enter clinics.

This, as you have recognized, is a moment for our communities to work as one to protect each other from this global pandemic. There is no place for virulent harassment and threatening behavior outside of abortion clinics any time, but it is especially crucial that you prohibit these protests from happening right now, when everyone’s health and wellbeing is at stake.

<sup>1</sup> National Abortion Federation, *2018 Violence and Disruption Statistics*, <https://prochoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018-Anti-Abortion-Violence-and-Disruption.pdf>.



As an Episcopal Priest, I appreciate your efforts to accommodate those who wish to gather in worship during these difficult times. However, the persistence of anti-abortion protesters in gathering en masse outside of clinics is a public health issue that simply must be addressed, and the unfortunate fact of the matter is that the religious exemption to Michigan's stay at home order has become these extremists' carte blanche for harassing health care workers and their patients, and increasing their odds of COVID-19 exposure in the process. I urge you to alter this exemption and ensure that patients and abortion providers can get care and do their jobs safely and without interference. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Ragsdale". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross-like mark at the end of the last word.

The Very Reverend Katherine H. Ragsdale  
President and CEO