



**Testimony of Renee Chelian, a U.S. abortion provider and women's human rights defender,
on the occasion of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of the United States**

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My name is Renee Chilean. In 1966, I had an illegal abortion. I was 15 and I desperately wanted the chance to live my life without being a mother at such a young age. It was a very brave decision that my parents helped me with. My father took me because my mother was six months pregnant with my younger sister, and he was afraid for her safety as well as mine. We were blindfolded and taken to some kind of warehouse. When the blindfold was removed there were many other girls there. No one talked for fear of being turned away. It was dangerous, it was very expensive, my parents could have been jailed, I don't know who did my abortion – I'm sure not a doctor – and I could have died or had serious complications or been left infertile. And we could tell no one out of fear and stigma associated with a crime that so many other women were also risking their lives for.

I was willing to risk my life for a second chance. I didn't know then how this experience would change me forever. After the legalization of abortion in 1973, I became passionate about working to ensure that NO woman would ever have to experience another back alley, illegal abortion.

I got married 38 years ago, I became a mother to two beautiful girls. As I watched my daughters and their friends grow up, my commitment to the women of this world deepened and I became stronger than I ever imagined possible. I wanted to make the world a better and safer place for women, so I became an abortion provider.

In 1976, I founded three health centers that offer reproductive health and abortion care in the Detroit, Michigan area. My dream was to create a health care center for women that offered affordable, high-quality reproductive health care, including abortion, delivered by compassionate, well-trained physicians. My dream became a reality and more: my clinics are a place where women are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, where women have access to comprehensive pregnancy decision counseling and options for birth control.

The dream was not mine alone. In the years following the *Roe* decision, clinics such as mine opened across the country operated by health care professionals who shared the same passion about women's rights and safety. And you have to be passionate about these things in order to keep doing this work.

Anti-abortion extremists know THAT IF THERE ARE NO PROVIDERS, THEN THEY'VE WON THE BATTLE, and there will be no abortion services provided.

Abortion providers, and I am including clinic staff as well as physicians in this term, deal with intimidation and harassment from anti-abortion extremists every single day. We are threatened verbally and physically. Protestors picket us at our homes. They harass our families. They try to turn our neighbors against us. My clinic, like so many other clinics, was blockaded, with several hundred people surrounding the clinic and obstructing the doors, trying to prevent patients from getting inside the clinic. We get letters with anthrax threats and white powder inside the envelope.

Some clinics have been bombed. At one of my clinics, someone used chemicals to make the facility unusable. Some clinics have been set on fire. We spend much of our time with the police, FBI, politicians, picketers, protestors or bomb squads and the media that follow them.

We spend more money on security than we do on medical equipment. Our homes have been staked out by protestors. We have been hunted and stalked. Some of us have been murdered in our clinics, our homes and, most recently, in our houses of worship.

All of this affects us dramatically. Our lives are filled with enormous stress and anxiety, and yet...we continue to love and remain committed to the work we do. But the stress and anxiety also affects our children and spouses.

When my children started pre-school and then elementary school, I found it necessary to make special security arrangements with the schools because of my profession. When protestors came to our home, they terrified my young daughters and their friends. My youngest daughter suffered a sleep disorder, nightmares and fear of just about everyone and everything – including playing in our yard. She cried every night before bed for us to brick in her bedroom windows so that the protestors could not come in and kill her and us. We put alarms in our homes and cars, but despite these security precautions, the anti-abortion zealots destroyed her feeling of safety, all to try and intimidate me into quitting my job.

It is no wonder that some of the doctors, nurses and other health care professionals who chose to provide abortion care have left the field. The ever-present fear for personal and family safety and the constant state of siege becomes just too much. My former medical director, and a close friend, stopped providing abortions and moved to another state to escape the relentless pickets and threats at his medical office and home and to his family... and he is not the only one.

As a result, there is a nationwide shortage of abortion providers: 87% of counties in the US have no abortion provider. Some states have only a single abortion clinic, and the physicians who do abortions there fly in from another state. And so, these anti-abortion extremists hurt our patients in multiple ways. By terrorizing and intimidating abortion providers to stop doing abortions, they have created a country where some women have to travel hundreds of miles for a legal medical service.

Rural women, in particular, face enormous travel distances and thus a much harder time accessing abortion.

Low-income women struggle to come up with the funds for an abortion, just like they do for many other forms of health care. However, women who are on Medicaid, the government health care program for low-income people, generally won't have coverage for an abortion, even when it's needed to protect their health, unlike other forms of health care. Even when we can get funding assistance for the cost of a low-income woman's abortion procedure, she has to find the money to pay for transportation and child care, and has to be able to afford to take the time off from work. The time it takes to raise the necessary money often forces women to delay their procedures.

Let me remind you, first-trimester abortion is one of the safest medical procedures performed, but the risks to a woman's health do increase as time goes by. If a low-income woman lives in one of those 87% of US counties without an abortion provider, she also has to find a way to come up with the funds to travel.

And if she lives in one of the several states that requires two trips to the clinic, in person: first, to listen to a state-mandated lecture designed to discourage her from seeking an abortion; then, to return for the abortion at some later point, she's going to have to come up with even more money for a hotel stay and food as well.

When patients get to the clinic, they are harassed by anti-abortion protestors. Some clinics have had to hire security guards to protect patients as they walk from the clinic's parking lot to the clinic door. Protestors use cameras to record patients entering the clinic, and, sometimes, post pictures of patients on the Internet in an attempt to make their identities public.

Outside my clinics, protestors scream angry words at my patients, calling them ugly names and showing graphic pictures and propaganda in their faces. The protestors tell these women, and those who accompany them, that they are evil and will go to hell. They say God will punish them and that they will never have another child because of their sins. On a recent Saturday morning at one of my clinics, 400 protestors appeared out of nowhere, marching down the sidewalk in 2 by 2 formation, then surrounded the clinic and chanted at high volume over a loudspeaker. For the 45 minutes they stood there, no one could use the sidewalk in front of the clinic.

I came here today because I wanted to put a face on who WE are, the women and men who provide abortion care in the United States. And I wanted to explain how the anti-abortion protestors who terrorize us are harming not only us but, ultimately, the millions of women who come to us for quality reproductive health care.

I greatly appreciate that, under President Obama, the federal government has taken steps to reinvigorate its commitment to work with state and local law enforcement to protect providers against

harassment, intimidation and violence. And I hope that the cruel and punitive policies that withhold funding for most abortions from the women on Medicaid who need them will be repealed.

My daughters' and your daughters' lives someday may depend on us. I appreciate and thank you for your time today.

Renee Chilean is owner of Northland Family Planning Centers in metro Detroit, MI and is a founding member of the Abortion Care Network.