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Forced travel for later abortion care in the United States: Findings and recommendations

Introduction

Abortion after 12 weeks of pregnancy, referred to here as “later abortion,” is a critical part of abortion care. There are many reasons why people need later abortion care, including logistical and financial difficulties that forced them to delay obtaining care, and delays in discovering the pregnancy and needing time to make a decision.¹⁻⁵

Laws prohibiting abortion after 12 weeks (or earlier) and the small number of providers offering abortion care later in pregnancy force people to travel long distances.⁵⁻⁸ Later abortion care is more expensive than abortion care earlier in pregnancy and can require more than one visit to the clinic to complete the procedure.⁹⁻¹⁰ In addition, state mandated waiting periods can extend the number of days the individual needs to be away from home.¹¹ The burden of traveling, on top of the challenges of paying for the procedure, can make accessing later abortion care difficult or impossible.

There will likely be an increase in the number of people seeking later abortion as more state and federal abortion restrictions are enforced.^{6,12} Within the current hostile abortion landscape, understanding the existing travel burdens may help identify ways to support people and improve their abortion experience.⁷ In this brief, we describe a range of challenges people face when preparing for and traveling to the clinic for later abortion and recommendations for mitigating these challenges. We present data from interviews conducted in 2019 with staff from clinics, abortion funds, and practical support organizations, who provide logistical support (such as facilitating transportation or lodging) for people seeking later abortion care. We also present data from interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021 with clients seeking later abortion care.

Preparing for travel

An individual preparing for travel must organize a series of logistics, often in a place that is unfamiliar to them, including:

- Finding a clinic that offers later abortion care.
- Gathering enough funds to cover the cost of travel and the procedure.
- Identifying and securing transportation, overnight accommodations, and food.
- Arranging caretaking for others, such as children and/or elders.
- Securing time off of work.
- Managing logistics for an accompanying person to provide necessary support, transport them back home after the procedure, and/or stay with them in a hotel.

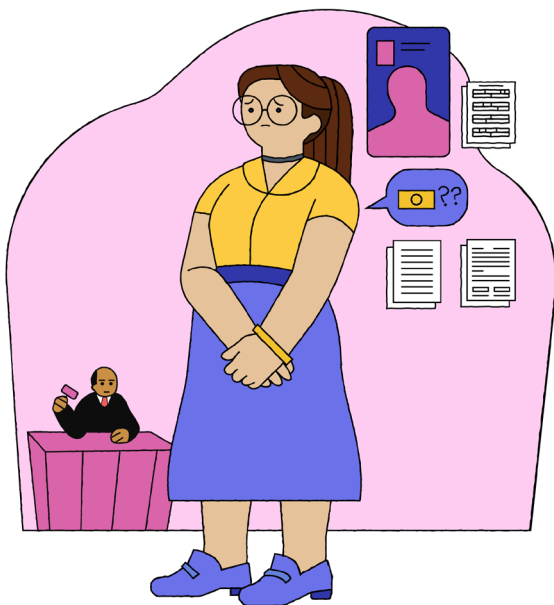




"We had so much to do in such a short amount of time before we had to be out of the place that we were living in before I could even go to my appointment at my correct clinic that I ended up getting my abortion at. So, we needed to figure out where we were gonna stay for a couple of days, where we were gonna keep all of our belongings. Then pack up the car." - 20-year-old client traveling from North Carolina

"A lot of our clients are parents who just – they have to use their funds towards the procedure, and then also towards someone to take care of their children and to feed their children... they have to reschedule their procedure because they're seeking childcare, and they can't do it this week, and so they have to do it next week. And then, by the next week, their procedure cost goes up." - Abortion fund staff member

"Right when students get cut their financial aid checks, they often bring them out here and use them to pay for the procedure, and then they're – I have a lot of students who are like, well, I'm screwed now, I can't pay for school, or I had to take out a couple extra of the subsidized loans instead, and they're already gonna be gaining interest because I used all my financial aid to pay for this and to come out here." - Practical support organization staff member



Specific preparations for minors

Young people face unique challenges in arranging for travel such as:

- Arranging time off from school.
- Involving family members (or other adults) for logistical and financial support.
- Obtaining permission ("judicial bypass") for the procedure from a judge. Minors who do not obtain parental consent in states where it is required to have an abortion must go through a "judicial bypass" process which causes further delays in accessing care, often requiring the pregnant person to fill out forms and appear in front of a judge to petition their case.

"[Judicial bypass] can delay things, and ... we've had some very lengthy cases that have lasted for months, just because of the nature of being a teenager and not – it being just too cumbersome. And then some kids, I think really, honestly, they just kind of have to give up. And just say, well, it's just gonna be easier for me to have a baby." - Clinic staff member

"With our minors, since the clinic in Albuquerque – I don't even think they're open on Saturdays. So that means that they're having to skip school, basically, which means that they're having to – they're pretty much always like, I can't leave before 8:00 a.m. Because their parents are gonna know. So they have to go to New Mexico at like 9:00 a.m. and then be back at like 9:00 p.m." - Abortion fund staff member

Transportation challenges en route to the clinic

After planning the logistics and finances to fund the travel, people may still face challenges and barriers along the way, including:

- Long journeys to the clinic.
- Fear and anxiety of travelling to an unfamiliar city or state.
- Rides being delayed or falling through.
- Lack of public transportation.
- Bad weather affecting travel.
- Unexpected changes or cancellations to bus, train, airplane itineraries.



- Fear or experienced discrimination due to need for credit card and/or government issued ID to book travel and accommodations, especially among undocumented people, or people whose gender does not align with their government issued ID.

“We were never told [why the flight was cancelled]. It kind of just turned into chaos in the airport because there was all these people waiting for that flight... And then suddenly, they made an announcement like the flight’s been cancelled [...] We need to get on the earliest possible next flight, which unfortunately wasn’t until the next morning. So, from there, we did also have to cover on our own finding a hotel that night.” - 23-year-old client traveling from California

“...when we’re talking with people about buying plane tickets, you or I might not consider that that could be a very real barrier for somebody if they’re not documented or if they just don’t have a state-issued ID that will allow them to get on a plane.”

- Abortion fund staff member

“The only thing I had concerns about I don’t drive on the interstate at all. And I was terrified because it’s the only way to get there was to get on the interstate. There was no back road to get there [...] So I actually had to pay someone to drive my car to take me there because I don’t drive on the interstate.” - 36-year old-client traveling from Arkansas



Recommendations

There are several actions that could help to support people in accessing abortion care throughout pregnancy, including:

- Remove laws that prohibit abortion at a certain gestational age, limit public funds to be used for abortion (Hyde Amendment), and require parental consent. These restrictions increase the burdens in accessing abortion care and infringe upon individuals’ right to reproductive autonomy.
- Increase funding for abortion funds and practical support organizations who play a critical role in providing financial, logistical, and emotional support to people seeking abortion.
- Improve referral systems and collaboration among organizations providing funding or practical support to streamline the experience of traveling and getting to care.
- Expand access to practical support that offers funding for transportation costs, creates networks of trusted volunteer drivers, and provides overnight lodging and support for caretaking duties.
- Offer clinic and support services that are inclusive of all genders and people that speak languages other than English.



Conclusion

All people should have access to abortion care throughout pregnancy in the communities where they live. However, the current trend in restrictive legislation will result in more people needing to travel long distances to access abortion care. People forced to travel for later abortion must navigate complex logistics before and during travel, while also finding enough money to cover travel and the procedure expenses. These challenges tend to be layered for people who have been targeted and harmed by systems of oppression including young people, Black, Indigenous and people of color, undocumented people, people who do not speak English, LGBTQIA+ people, gender expansive people, and those experiencing housing insecurity or working to make ends meet.

It is necessary to understand these challenges and the ways they can be cumulative and overlapping for people in order to identify and increase support. Increasing funding and expanding access to abortion funds and practical support organizations that offer person-centered individualized support may facilitate a more streamlined travel experience.

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