

What Florida's New 6-Week Abortion Ban Means for the South, and Traveling Patients

A recent Florida Supreme Court ruling effectively left women in much of the South with little or no access to abortion clinics.

May 9, 2024 By Christopher O'Donnell, Tampa Bay Times and KFF Health News

Monica Kelly was thrilled to learn she was expecting her second child.

The Tennessee mother was around 13 weeks pregnant when, according to a lawsuit filed against the state of Tennessee, doctors gave her the devastating news that her baby had [Patau syndrome](#).

The genetic disorder causes serious developmental defects and often results in miscarriage, stillbirth, or death within one year of birth. Continuing her pregnancy, doctors told her, could put her at risk of infection and complications that include high blood pressure, organ failure, and death.

But they said they could not perform an abortion due to a Tennessee law banning most abortions that went into effect two months after the repeal of Roe v. Wade in June 2022, court records show.

So Kelly traveled to a northwestern Florida hospital to get an abortion while about 15 weeks pregnant. She is one of seven women and two doctors [suing Tennessee](#) because they say the state's near-total abortion ban imperils the lives of pregnant women.

More than 25,000 women like Kelly traveled to Florida for an abortion over the past five years, state data shows. Most came from states such as Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi with little or no access to abortion, [data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows](#). Hundreds traveled from as far as Texas.

But a recent Florida Supreme Court ruling paved the way for the Sunshine State to enforce a six-week ban beginning in May, effectively leaving women in much of the South with little or no access to abortion clinics. The ban could be short-lived if 60% of Florida voters in November approve a constitutional amendment adding the right to an abortion.

In the meantime, nonprofit groups are warning they may not be able to meet the increased

demand for help from women from Florida and other Southeastern states to travel for an abortion. They fear women who lack the resources will be forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term because they cannot afford to travel to states where abortions are more available.

That could include women whose pregnancies, like Kelly's, put them at risk.

"The six-week ban is really a problem not just for Florida but the entire Southeast," said McKenna Kelley, a board member of the [Tampa Bay Abortion Fund](#). "Florida was the last man standing in the Southeast for abortion access."

Travel Bans and Stricter Limits

Supporters of the Florida restrictions aren't backing down. Some want even stricter limits. Republican state Rep. [Mike Beltran](#) voted for both the 15-week and six-week bans. He said the vast majority of abortions are elective and that those related to medical complications make up a tiny fraction.

[State data](#) shows that 95% of abortions last year were either elective or performed due to social or economic reasons. More than 5% were related to issues with either the health of the mother or the fetus.

Beltran said he would support a ban on travel for abortions but knows it would be challenged in the courts. He would support measures that prevent employers from paying for workers to travel for abortions and such costs being tax-deductible, he said.

"I don't think we should make it easier for people to travel for abortion," he said. "We should put things in to prevent circumvention of the law."

Both abortion bans were also supported by GOP state lawmaker [Joel Rudman](#). As a physician, Rudman said, he has delivered more than 100 babies and sees nothing in the current law that sacrifices patient safety.

"It is a good commonsense law that provides reasonable exceptions yet respects the sanctity of life for both mother and child," he said in a text message.

Last year, the first full year that many Southern states had bans in place, more than 7,700 women traveled to Florida for an abortion, an increase of roughly 59% compared with three years ago.

The Tampa Bay Abortion Fund, which is focused on helping local women, found itself assisting an influx of women from Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and other states, Kelley said.

In 2023, it paid out more than \$650,000 for appointment costs and over \$67,000 in other expenses such as airplane tickets and lodging. Most of those who seek assistance are from low-income families including minorities or disabled people, Kelley said.

"We ask each person, 'What can you contribute?'" she said. "Some say zero and that's fine."

Florida's new law will mean her group will have to pivot again. The focus will now be on helping people seeking abortions travel to other states.

But the destinations are farther and more expensive. Most women, she predicted, will head to New York, Illinois, or Washington, D.C. Clinic appointments in those states are often more expensive. The extra travel distance will mean help is needed with hotels and airfare.

North Carolina, which allows abortions through about 12 weeks of pregnancy, may be a slightly cheaper option for some women whose pregnancies are not as far along, she said.

Keeping up with that need is a concern, she said. Donations to the group soared to \$755,000 in 2022, which Kelley described as "rage donations" made after the U.S. Supreme Court ended half a century of guaranteeing the federal right to an abortion.

The anger didn't last. Donations in 2023 declined to \$272,000, she said.

"We're going to have huge problems on our hands in a few weeks," she said. "A lot of people who need an abortion are not going to be able to access one. That's really scary and sad."

Gray Areas Lead to Confusion

The [Chicago Abortion Fund](#) is expecting that many women from Southeastern states will head its way.

Illinois offers abortions up until fetal viability — around 24 to 26 weeks. The state five years ago repealed its law requiring parents to be notified when their children seek an abortion.

About 3 in 10 abortions performed in Illinois two years ago — [almost 17,000](#) — involved out-of-state residents, up from fewer than a quarter the previous year, according to state records.

The Chicago nonprofit has prided itself on not turning away requests for help over the past five years, said Qudsiyyah Shariyf, a deputy director. It is adding staffers, including Spanish-language speakers, to cope with an anticipated uptick in calls for help from Southern states. She hopes Florida voters will make the crisis short-lived.

"We're estimating we'll need an additional \$100,000 a month to meet that influx of folks from Florida and the South," she said. "We know it's going to be a really hard eight months until something potentially changes."

Losing access to abortion, especially among vulnerable groups like pregnant teenagers and women with pregnancy complications, could also increase cases of mental illness such as depression, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder, said [Silvia Kaminsky](#), a licensed marriage and family therapist in Miami.

Kaminsky, who serves as board president of the [American Association for Marriage and Family](#)

[Therapy](#), said the group has received calls from therapists seeking legal guidance about whether they can help a client who wants to travel for an abortion.

That's especially true in states such as Alabama, Georgia, and Missouri that have passed laws granting "personhood" status to fetuses. Therapists in many states, including Florida, are required to report a client who intends to harm another individual.

"It's creating all these gray areas that we didn't have to deal with before," Kaminsky said.

Deborah Dorbert of Lakeland, Florida, said that Florida's 15-week abortion limit put her health at risk and that she was forced to carry to term a baby with no chance of survival.

Her unborn child was diagnosed with [Potter syndrome](#) in November 2022. An ultrasound taken at 23 weeks of pregnancy showed that the fetus had not developed enough amniotic fluid and that its kidneys were undeveloped.

Doctors told her that her child would not survive outside the womb and that there was a high risk of a stillbirth and, for her, preeclampsia, a pregnancy complication that can result in high blood pressure, organ failure, and death.

One option doctors suggested was a pre-term inducement, essentially an abortion, Dorbert said.

Dorbert and her husband were heartbroken. They decided an abortion was their safest option.

At Lakeland Regional Health, she said, she was told her surgery would have to be approved by the hospital administration and its lawyers since Florida had that year enacted its 15-week abortion restriction.

Florida's abortion law includes an exemption if two physicians certify in writing that a fetus has a fatal fetal abnormality and has not reached viability. But a month elapsed before she got an answer in her case. Her doctor told her the hospital did not feel they could legally perform the procedure and that she would have to carry the baby to term, Dorbert said.

Lakeland Regional Health did not respond to repeated calls and emails seeking comment.

Dorbert's gynecologist had mentioned to her that some women traveled for an abortion. But Dorbert said she could not afford the trip and was concerned she might break the law by going out of state.

At 37 weeks, doctors agreed to induce Dorbert. She checked into Lakeland Regional Hospital in March 2023 and, after a long and painful labor, gave birth to a boy named Milo.

"When he was born, he was blue; he didn't open his eyes; he didn't cry," she said. "The only sound you heard was him gasping for air every so often."

She and her husband took turns holding Milo. They read him a book about a mother polar bear who tells her cub she will always love them. They sang Bob Marley and The Wailers' "Three Little Birds" to Milo with its chorus that "every little thing is gonna be alright."

Milo died in his mother's arms 93 minutes after being born.

One year later, Dorbert is still dealing with the anguish. The grief is still "heavy" some days, she said.

She and her husband have discussed trying for another child, but Florida's abortion laws have made her wary of another pregnancy with complications.

"It makes you angry and frustrated. I could not get the health care I needed and that my doctors advised for me," she said. "I know I can't go through what I went through again."

This article was produced through a partnership between KFF Health News and the Tampa Bay Times.

[This story](#) was published by KFF Health News on April 29, 2024. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/floridas-new-6week-abortion-ban-means-south-traveling-patients>