

Why Teenagers Seeking Abortion Care Are Texting 'Abby'

Apr 24, 2020

Rewire.News

2:30pm

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<https://rewire.news/article/2020/04/24/why-teenagers-seeking-abortion-care-are-texting-abby/>

"I think that it is easy if you're looking at the headlines to think that clinics are closed or that courts are closed."

Minors in 21 states are required by law to get their parents' permission before having an abortion. But for many, that's not possible.

Instead, they have to navigate their county's legal system to petition for a judicial waiver of parental consent while dealing with their state's various abortion restrictions, which might include gestational limits and forced waiting periods. The COVID-19 pandemic has put legal abortion even further out of reach for many, as Republicans in some states are trying to close abortion clinics as a response to the virus outbreak, while some clinics are temporarily closing or consolidating their services.

But advocates in North Carolina have introduced a new way to help minors maneuver through reproductive health-care restrictions. The Carolina Abortion Fund partnered with the state's ACLU to create a text line that helps minors maneuver this confusing web of medically unnecessary restrictions and get the legal and financial assistance they need—even amid the chaos of a pandemic.

The line, called Text Abby, is confidential, free, and available every day from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. Mars Earle, director of engagement at the Carolina Abortion Fund, told Rewire.News the line soft-launched at the beginning of April. Earle began working on the line after being approached by two groups: If/When/How, a reproductive justice legal organization, and Jane's Due Process, which helps young people in Texas navigate parental consent laws on abortion care and birth control.

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Around ten groups convened to talk about what it's like for minors to get an abortion and petition for a judicial waiver of parental consent, Earle said. They learned that North Carolina abortion clinics often didn't have many resources for minors; most clinics provided abortion care to only a small number of minors each year, most of whom came to the facility with parental consent or a waiver already in hand.

"The question then became, do our young people know that this is an option for them?" they said. "And what is happening for young people that may be wards of the state or are detained?"

The text line, Earle said, was a good place to start answering those questions and "take the temperature" of minors' needs. It's a resource that minors will be able to find through clinics or online.

"We're redoing our websites [so that] if you Google 'minor abortion in North and South Carolina' we're trying to be the first thing that pops up so that accurate information is there," Earle said. For years, the

top Google results for searches related to abortion care have included anti-choice clinics that lie to pregnant people and don't offer a full range of reproductive health services.

When a young person texts the line, the first response they receive is from Elizabeth Barber, a reproductive freedom fellow at the ACLU of North Carolina. Sometimes people reach out because they're having a pregnancy scare, and Barber will refer them to online resources about when or how to take a pregnancy test.

"Almost always people do not know what the requirements are for minors in whatever state they are," she said.

She expected one to three people would text the help line each month, but she's had that many people reach out every day. "We've been overwhelmed by the response we've gotten," Barber said. "I think that just speaks to the need, and I think that it speaks to how desperate people are for help right now, or maybe all of the time."

She doesn't know whether the high frequency is related to the COVID-19 pandemic, she said, but it has played a role in abortion access for some of the young people she's texted. While the line is only meant for minors in North Carolina, Barber has received texts from people in South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. "Some people [outside of North Carolina] have had extra difficulty finding clinics that can help, because some clinics are operating under limited schedules or limited offerings in light of COVID-19," she said.

Restrictions on abortion impact teens more, Barber said, because they might not have access to money or transportation. In addition to those barriers, young people might have to miss school and find transportation to a courthouse to file a petition for judicial waiver. In some cases, they have to do all of this without their parents knowing.

In states where officials are trying to use the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to halt legal abortion, young people face even more barriers that might prevent them from getting care.

Though abortion clinics in North Carolina are operating under their usual schedules, Barber is worried that the pandemic will affect whether young people who need abortion care pursue judicial bypass. The process is intimidating even outside of a pandemic because it requires youths to interact with the legal system and have a hearing with a judge. Most don't know it's free and confidential, and that they are entitled to an attorney to represent them at no cost.

"There's a lack of information," she said. "I think that it is easy if you're looking at the headlines to think that clinics are closed or that courts are closed." Even if someone knows where to start the judicial bypass process, Barber said they might run into additional obstacles like limited court hours or limited clerk's hours.

She said that's why the text line is helpful, especially during the pandemic. "It's important that there is easy access to a real live person who can help you find answers, whether you're in North Carolina or if you're in another state," Barber said.

Jessica Goldberg, the youth access counsel for If/When/How, told Rewire.News the idea for Text Abby came from a meeting held in North Carolina in fall 2018 as part of its Youth Access Strategic Initiative.

She said the ACLU of Utah also developed a judicial bypass project after their staff attorney attended the National Judicial Bypass Convening in 2018.

What often stops advocacy organizations from creating a teen text line or something similar is a lack of time and resources.

“Many of the stakeholders we help bring together are already working to help young people access abortion care, but they are doing it in silos and on a case-by-case basis,” Goldberg said. “These meetings give advocates the time and space to focus specifically on access for young people, enable them to dig into the barriers to access specific to people under 18, and allow them to get to know the other folks in their state who are also doing this work.”

The text line will help bridge the gap between young people, legal advocates, and an abortion fund that can help with financial assistance for abortion care and travel. Earle said the line was modeled after one operated by Jane’s Due Process, and another run by the ACLU of Illinois.

Text Abby is the first step toward making abortion more accessible for minors in North Carolina. Before the Carolina Abortion Fund launched the line, Earle helped a minor in South Carolina get an abortion, but it wasn’t easy. The minor, who was referred to the Carolina Abortion Fund by Jane’s Due Process, was too far along to access abortion in South Carolina, where the legislature has implemented a range of restrictions.

The Carolina Abortion Fund had to transport her from South Carolina to two cities in North Carolina to help her get a judicial waiver and then an abortion. “So it was people in Texas, North Carolina, [and] South Carolina who all rallied together to get her a lawyer, get her waiver, get her fully funded, and then actually drive her to all these locations,” Earle said. “But she got the care she wanted.”

During the pandemic, Earle said the text line will be there to provide support, because one of the Carolina Abortion Fund’s values is “slowing down and meeting people where they’re at.”

“That’s what we’re hoping this service can be,” they said, “even if they don’t need us beyond just someone to talk to you for a minute or so—that human connection and witnessing.”

TOPICS AND TAGS: Abortion, Abortion Care, Abortion restrictions, Abortion Restrictions, Access to abortion, ACLU, Economic Justice, Human Rights, judicial bypass, Law and Policy, North Carolina, Reproductive rights, South Carolina, Utah