

2/14/05

Date 3-10-05

Bill No. HB 324

## Opinion

### **Gazette opinion: Buffer-zone would help protect patient privacy**

The Montana House took a stand last week for personal privacy and the right to be let alone when going into a hospital or clinic.

By a narrow margin, the House approved House Bill 324, which would create a do-not-confront zone around people entering or leaving a health-care facility. The proposed law would apply within 36 feet of a health-care facility and would prevent people from approaching within eight feet of a person entering or leaving the facility.

#### **Unobstructed access to health care**

The legislation, sponsored by Reps. Robyn Driscoll of Billings, John Parker of Great Falls, Emelie Eaton of Laurel, Dave Wanzenreid of Missoula, Jon Sesso of Butte and Bob Bergren of Havre, was precipitated by ongoing abortion protests. But the issue addressed by the bill is the right of Montanans to have unobstructed access to health-care facilities. At least 15 states have such laws and this type of restriction on protests has been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The clinics targeted by protesters provide many other reproductive health services, such as cancer screenings and contraceptives. According to a Great Falls legislator, a family planning clinic in his city is the regular scene of abortion protests, although it doesn't even perform abortions.

#### **Helping low-income women**

Family planning clinics largely serve women with low incomes and no insurance - women who need access to affordable health care. These women deserve the same privacy afforded patients who go to the pricier clinics. Who wants anybody in their face to "protest, counsel or educate about a health issue" when they are simply trying to walk into a medical appointment? Health-care appointments can be stressful enough for many other reasons.

Fortunately for Montanans, a bipartisan House majority (thanks to 50 Democrats and two Republicans, Mark Noennig of Billings and Bernie Olson of Lakeside) took a stand for privacy and health-care access. Republicans did have input with an amendment decreasing the maximum fine for violating the proposed buffer zone to \$100 from the original proposal of \$1,000.

We call on the Senate to approve HB324, and we call on Gov. Brian Schweitzer to sign this reasonable legislation into law.