McCullen v. Coakley
Oral Arguments were heard Wednesday, January 15

Case Summary:

After patients and staff endured years of harassment outside Massachusetts abortion clinics, the state legislature, in 2007, enacted a 35-foot buffer zone surrounding entrances all entrances to reproductive health clinics, making it a crime to demonstrate in this area. Employees or agents of the clinic acting within the scope of their employment are exempt. Petitioners in this case (McCullen) argue that this law is viewpoint-biased and therefore unconstitutionally limits free speech rights.

Buffer zones like the one enacted in Massachusetts ensure that women and their reproductive health care providers can enter health care facilities safely, without fear of threats, intimidation, or violence. Even today, 1 in 5 clinics across the country experience severe cases of violence at clinics including stalking, physical barriers to the clinics, arson, chemical attacks and regular threats of attacks, to name a few examples. Buffer zone laws are essential to safeguarding the exercise of fundamental rights—like voting, going to school, and attending religious services—from interference by third-parties. Should the Court decide to overturn this law, there would be a devastating nationwide impact on clinic safety and, further, could undermine buffer zone protections for houses of worship and associated religious gatherings like funeral services, weddings, etc.

Talking Points:

- Buffer zones are one of the few mechanisms proven to be effective in reducing the very real threats of violence and intimidation that abortion providers and their patients face every day—including doctors and clinic staff who have been threatened with harm, and facilities which have been bombed, burned down, and blockaded.
- Massachusetts’ law creates a safe space around reproductive health care facilities, while continuing to respect the rights of anti-choice protesters to distribute literature or engage in conversation with whomever they choose outside that space.
- Laws securing women’s safe passage into reproductive health care facilities are part of a long tradition of government action aimed at safeguarding the exercise of fundamental rights—like voting, going to school, and attending religious services—from interference by third-parties. The Unitarian Universalist Association affirms the rights of all people to freedom of speech, attendance of religious service, and health care.

Find tips on writing a letter to the editor.

Social Media Resources:

This is a time to raise awareness of buffer zones and their impact. As people of faith, we can be public in our support for the health and safety of abortion providers and all people whose lives take them in the vicinity of these clinics. Please post and tweet leading up to the Supreme Court’s decision in this case.
Sample tweets:

- Abortion clinics are not battle zones. Patients should be able to access care without fear of violence or intimidation #protectthezone
- In a recent survey, 51% of facilities w/buffer zones reported a decrease in criminal activity. #protectaccess to abortion care now! #protectthezone
- Buffer zones protect voters outside polling places and women entering #reprohealth facilities #protectthezone
- Stop violence, obstruction and intimidation outside of #reprohealth facilities #protectthezone
- #reprohealth buffer zones have support of law enforcement #protectthezone
- We stand w/#abortion providers and their patients #protectthezone
- Violence against #abortion provs is real: bit.ly/1cc0fuA. they need a #safespace #protectthezone

Additional Resources:

- Background on this case and the legal history of buffer zone laws
- Supreme Court Blog page about the case with all supporting documents and details
- Statement submitted to the Supreme Court from the faith community, including the Unitarian Universalist Association