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For Oregon residents seeking an abortion, finding a clinic or provider to perform one is easy.

What is often harder to come by is the rest of the experience – the personal support, a ride to your appointment, a sympathetic ear, a hand to squeeze or even simply someone to bear witness. In Portland, a new group of abortion doulas hopes to change that reality for the thousands of people in and around the city who obtain abortions each year.

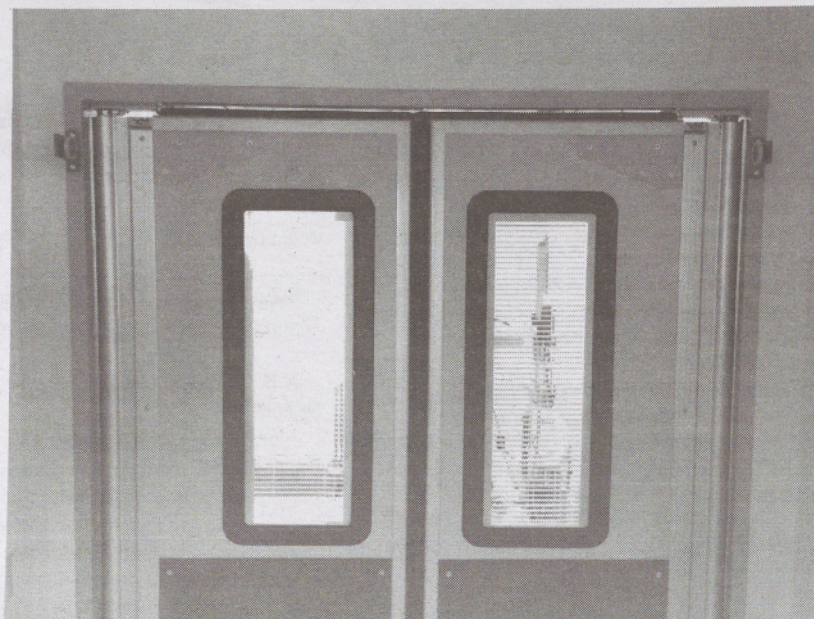
Cascades Abortion Support Collective is a small, all-volunteer group of abortion support and transportation workers who provide people seeking abortions in and around the Portland area with logistical, physical, emotional and informational support. Born of Portland's reproductive justice and doula communities, the organization's mission is to fight abortion's social stigma by empowering those it serves through the experiences before, during and after ending a pregnancy.

"Anyone in any experience deserves abortion support, that's one of our grounding principles," said CASC co-founder Ariel, speaking with Street Roots in her Portland home.

These are not easy times to be an abortion rights advocate, and the members of CASC refuse to give their last names for that reason.

"We decline to provide our last names because as a collective, we feel it is important to insure that anyone can participate in CASC without needing to further endanger themselves," Meg said. Unfortunately, we currently live in a society which highly stigmatizes abortion work with individuals and groups even going to violent extremes to attack this community. For this and other reasons, we only provide first names when speaking with press"

Ariel, along with fellow co-founder and reproductive justice activist Meg, co-founded the group in early 2015, recruiting from their network of full-spectrum doulas to support people through all reproductive experiences, including abortion, surrogacy, miscarriages and stillbirths. After months of formalizing procedures, compiling resources and focusing their mission, CASC held their first official meeting of collective members in May. Since then, the small collective of four core collective members with backgrounds in reproductive justice and full-spectrum doula work, said they have supported about 10 people through their abortion experiences, providing those they support with rides to and from their appointments, coaching in physical and emotional coping mechanisms, and informational referrals and support. According to CASC, those whom they have already supported found the group via their



A walk in her shoes

Abortion is legal but carries damaging stigmas for the people who seek the service. A new organization in Portland is working to change that.

website, their Facebook page, word of mouth or via referrals from NARAL Pro-Choice America and the Oregon-based Network for Reproductive Options.

Here's how they work: A ring to the CASC's phone number connects callers with an available member of the collective who then does a short intake interview, understanding what procedure or experience the caller is seeking support for and getting a feel for their specific needs. The caller is then matched with the collective's best suited doula and the two meet in a public place to further discuss what the caller wants from their abortion experience. Before the abortion procedure, the doula is there to answer questions about the procedure and help the person formulate questions for a medical provider. During the procedure, however, the doula's role can vary from intimate support such as holding the patient's hand or applying accupressure points to more hands-off support methods such as fetching water or waiting in the other room to be there when it's all over.

"It's such a different experience for different people, which is why we really try to focus on having broad skills knowing that what people need is going to be vastly different," said Heather, an abortion doula and collective member. Support continues after the procedure is over, with abortion doulas checking in one day, one week and one month afterward to offer a listening ear, advice or connection to more longer term community resources if necessary. Collective members also send each person home with abortion after-care kits containing heat wraps, sanitary pads, tea, chocolate, chapstick, candles and a list of after-care resources.

"It's both to provide them with these physical items, but also as a gesture of this is an experience that deserves support,"

said Ariel, who believes stigma associated with abortion prevents people from getting the emotional support they may need after obtaining one. "People really often take on that [stigma] and start to devalue themselves or it affects their identity or their self worth, and that's what we're trying to combat," said Heather.

Abortion and full-spectrum doula collectives have been forming across the country in the past decade, perhaps the most well-known being New York City's The Doula Project, which formed in 2007. San Francisco's The Bay Area Doula Project formed in 2011 and held an abortion doula training in Portland in June 2014, which CASC members attended before organizing the following year. Like The Doula Project and The Bay Area Doula Project, CASC operates in a state with largely no legal restrictions on abortions. Under Oregon law, individuals and private institutions can refuse to provide abortions, but legal restrictions such as parental consent or waiting periods are not in place. Even so, abortions are not easily accessible for many of Oregon's rural residents. Of the 12 Oregon abortion clinics listed on the Network for Reproductive Options's website, six are located in Portland and all are in cities, making transportation, not legal access, a major barrier for people in remote communities seeking abortions.

And while being located in Oregon means CASC isn't guiding and supporting people through the same legal obstacles they would face in other states, they still cite defeating the stigma of abortion as their main concern. "This is where we are and we're excited to serve this community," said Heather. "Because no matter where you are there's no place where it's easy and unstigmatized to get an abortion."

2015 saw national anti-abortion movements culminate when Planned

Parenthood president Cecile Richards testified in front of a House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing in September. Three months later Senate Republicans voted to strip Planned Parenthood of federal funding. Closer to home, the Planned Parenthood on Northeast MLK Jr. Boulevard continues to be the site of frequent anti-abortion protests and anti-abortion billboards, the work of Minneapolis-based nonprofit ProLife Across America. According to ProLife Across America President Mary Ann Kuharski, who spoke to Street Roots via phone from the organization's Minneapolis headquarters, 2015 was the first year the organization put up its billboards in the state, reflecting what it said is a recent rise in donations to the organization from Oregon residents. The organization claimed to have paid for 60 billboards in the Portland area this past year.

Violence is also a concern for the group. In November 2015, a gunman opened fire on a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colo., killing three people.

"Portland is a liberal, more secular, more alternative or progressive community," said Heather, "but that doesn't protect us from people who take extreme acts."

CASC has a number of safety procedures in place to protect both the abortion service workers and those who seek their services. And while abortion providers are most frequently the targets of anti-abortion extremist violence, others in the pro-choice orbit are vulnerable to threats as well. In fall 2015, Seattle writers Amelia Bonow and Lindy West created the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag to encourage women to fight stigma by sharing their abortion experiences on social media. After #ShoutYourAbortion went viral, The New York Times reported the two began receiving threats and the location of Bonow's residence was exposed online.

Despite the risks, CASC volunteers are committed to sustaining their work through further public outreach and development of partnerships with area abortion clinics and providers. In February, CASC plans to hold an abortion doula training in which birth doulas and laypeople alike can receive training in emotional and physical support skills and learn about area-specific abortion resources. They hope the training will eventually translate into more abortion support workers and transportation volunteers for their small operation so they can expand their services outside of the Portland metro area.

"We have this sense there's this emergency," Ariel said. "This is an emergency, the fact that people don't have the support they need. So we want to do what we can to fix it and address it. But also we want this organization to exist long term, so we've also been taking time to set roots that will enable us to grow."