

Making Reproductive Justice a Reality for California Women: How ACCESS Removes Barriers to Health Care

Californians enjoy some of the strongest reproductive rights in the nation. Yet, thousands of women in California still find it nearly impossible to act on these rights or obtain reproductive health care without struggle.

ACCESS makes an incredible difference in the lives of these California women. Since our founding in 1993, ACCESS has helped more than 20,000 women find reproductive health information and services without isolation or delay. Our multilingual and multicultural hotlines provide free and nonjudgmental information, referrals, education, peer counseling and advocacy on the full range of reproductive health services – from abortion to pap smears to prenatal care. ACCESS also conducts community education and policy advocacy, in collaboration with activists, clients and allied organizations, to further our mission of making reproductive justice a reality for all women.

Nearly two-thirds of our callers between 2003 and 2005 inquired about abortion and most faced barriers due to insurance status, language or geographic location. Thirty-one percent of callers seeking abortion identified themselves as White, 22% as Latina, 12% as African-American and 6% as Asian Pacific Islander, the remainder did not identify their race/ethnicity. The average age of callers seeking abortion was 26, which was slightly younger than the average age of all callers during this period. More than one-fifth of callers seeking abortion were younger than 21 years old. Five percent of callers seeking abortion spoke only Spanish and 2% spoke only a language other than English.

Data collected from these callers provides a snapshot of the practical barriers that prevent many women from accessing the reproductive health services they need and deserve – and how ACCESS helps remove those barriers.

Geographic and Financial Barriers

Kristen¹, a low-income woman from Shasta County, had to travel 440 miles roundtrip for an appointment in San Francisco because there was no abortion provider in her area that would see her at that point in her pregnancy. Unfortunately, she had no reliable form of transportation and no money to pay for a bus ticket.

Like Kristen, many women in rural and isolated areas seeking abortions in California experience difficulties in locating abortion providers in their area and must travel great distances to reach an appointment. In fact, of the 48 California counties that ACCESS primarily serves, nearly half of the counties do not have an abortion provider, forcing many ACCESS clients to travel across the state, and often at a great cost to them and their families. To help women who find it challenging to arrange and pay for travel and accommodations to reach providers, ACCESS gives practical and financial support to many callers. Through our *Women In Need Fund*, between 2003 and 2005, ACCESS assisted 14% of callers seeking abortion with funding or coordinated rides and home hospitality through our Practical Support Network of dedicated volunteers.

¹ To protect the privacy of ACCESS callers, names and identifying information have been changed.

Information Barriers

Francine, a 19-year-old from Merced, wanted an abortion, but did not know how far along in her pregnancy she was because she did not pay attention to her menstrual cycle.

Young women in particular are often misinformed about reproductive biology. Studies have shown that they get most of their reproductive health information from unreliable sources, such as friends or product advertising. When faced with a suspected unintended pregnancy, they are in great need of the unbiased peer education and support that ACCESS hotline staff and volunteers provide. For every young woman who finds the ACCESS hotline number in the Yellow Pages, from a friend, or from a health care provider, there are countless young women who do not know to call ACCESS for help and are left in the dark about their options.

Insurance Barriers

Susan from Contra Costa County called because her private insurance company told her they wouldn't cover abortion, which was not correct. The ACCESS volunteer cleared up the misinformation and helped her to advocate for herself with the insurance company.

In a state with a very high uninsured population, there are countless stories highlighting the insurance barriers many California women face. Twenty-eight percent of our callers seeking abortion were uninsured and many did not know that they were eligible for coverage under Emergency Medi-Cal for pregnancy-related services, including abortion. Others simply did not know how to find a provider or get through the red tape of signing up for Medi-Cal. For the 19% of callers who were privately insured, many women also found it difficult to learn if their insurance covered abortion or whether there was a nearby abortion provider within their insurance network. ACCESS helps these women by providing appropriate referrals, assisting them in filling out Medi-Cal enrollment forms and advocating for their rights to services.

Medi-Cal Barriers

Dawn, a 17-year-old from Alameda County, tried to sign up for Emergency Medi-Cal and was chastised by the Medi-Cal worker: "next time you should think twice before going out and having fun." Based on this, Dawn was convinced that she wasn't eligible for Medi-Cal.

It is not surprising that many uninsured or underinsured callers – especially young, immigrant women – often do not know they are eligible for Medi-Cal or that Medi-Cal pays for pregnancy-related services, including abortion. Due to rampant misconceptions about coverage among the public and within the Medi-Cal bureaucracy itself, many eligible women are unaware of their right to access abortion under Medi-Cal.

The 37% of ACCESS callers who covered under Medi-Cal did not necessarily have an easier time accessing abortion. Medi-Cal workers often discourage women - whether intentionally or unintentionally - from signing up by providing erroneous information or, as in Dawn's experience, expressing disapproval of their decisions. ACCESS works with these women to dispel the myths about Medi-Cal coverage, provide referrals, and assist with the practical details so women can reach their appointments without hardship.