

PEI to finally offer abortions on the island

Under the threat of a constitutional challenge to its abortion policy, which required women to travel to neighbouring provinces at their own expense, the Prince Edward Island government says medical and surgical abortions will be available on the island by the end of 2016. They haven't been available for 34 years.

"We recognize that Islanders, including members of the legislative assembly, have strong personal beliefs on this issue; we also recognize our obligation to provide timely and professional health care, without discrimination," Premier Wade MacLauchlan said at a news conference.

He noted that the government was unlikely to win the [lawsuit launched](#) by Abortion Access Now PEI Inc. That suit contended that the government's policy contravened the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and that its purpose "is to advance a particular conception of morality and to restrict access to abortion as a socially undesirable or immoral practice." The pro-choice group filed a notice of litigation in January that required a response from the government within 90 days.

The government's decision to provide abortions on PEI will do more than ensure timely and safe access to this health service; it will reduce the stigma associated with abortion on the island, says Ann Wheatley, cochair of Abortion Access Now PEI. "The policy of the government not to allow abortions to be performed in the province has for the past 30 years conveyed a message that there was something wrong, even sinister, about the procedure. It had the effect of stigma-



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For the first time in 34 years, Prince Edward Island will begin offering abortion services on the island by the end of 2016.

tizing abortion, and causing women to feel ashamed and fearful."

No abortions have been performed in PEI since 1982. They are offered out of province at the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with a referral from a PEI physician, or at the Moncton Hospital in New Brunswick, where no referral is necessary. The latter option is relatively new. MacLauchlan made arrangements with the Moncton facility shortly after he was elected in May 2015. Women do not have to pay for the cost of out-of-province abortion services, but they must pay for their own travel, accommodation and other related expenses.

PEI's new women's reproductive health centre on the island will offer medical and surgical abortions, and

may also offer pre- and postnatal counseling, and fertility and postpartum support. The new centre will be based in a hospital.

The PEI government's announcement has pitted antiabortion activists against pro-choice groups on the island and across the country. It has, however, received kudos from the prime minister. "The Government of Canada reaffirms its belief that a woman should have access to reproductive health services, no matter where they live in our country," Justin Trudeau said in a statement.

Feminist Gloria Steinem said the move was [a victory for women's reproductive rights](#). — donalee Moulton, Halifax, NS

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