

# The Mother's Health Clinic of Phoenix (1932-1942)

The Mother's Health Clinic opened in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1937 and provided women in central Arizona with contraception and family planning resources. A group of wealthy philanthropic Phoenix women founded the clinic under the guidance of birth control activist Margaret Sanger. The clinic was the second birth control clinic to open in Arizona and the first to serve central and northern Arizona residents. In 1942, the clinic affiliated with the national organization Planned Parenthood Federation of America and eventually formed the Planned Parenthood of Central and Northern Arizona. The Mother's Health Clinic provided Arizona women with contraception and family planning at a time when birth control was not widely accepted or available.

In the early 1930s, Sanger moved to Tucson, Arizona, to improve the health of her son, who had tuberculosis. Prior to moving to Arizona, Sanger had fought for birth control rights in New York City, New York. At the time, Arizona's infant mortality rate nearly doubled the national rate, a fact that Sanger described as unacceptable. According to historian Mary Melcher, high rates of infant mortality were partly due to Arizona's poor rural makeup. Residents faced large distances between rural farms and towns with poor infrastructure and transportation. Additionally, because Arizona lacked qualified medical professionals, many Arizona women had no choice but to have home births with care from family or friends.

After moving to Arizona, Sanger responded to the high rates of infant mortality by promoting contraception as a means of family planning, the idea of limiting and spacing children based on what the woman can emotionally, physically, and financially afford. In 1934 Sanger helped to open Clinica para Madres (Mothers' Clinic) in Tucson, Arizona, the first birth control clinic in Arizona. Two years later, in 1936, birth control became federally legal in the case, *United States v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries* (1936), decided in the US Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York City, New York. The case overturned the federal Comstock Act of 1873, which banned the distribution of contraceptives. However, many states retained their own Comstock Laws, which made it illegal and difficult for women to access birth control. In Arizona, a 1901 territorial law prohibited the dissemination of information about contraception or sex. According to Melcher, despite slowly changing laws on the federal scale, the stigma and moral condemnation surrounding sex and contraception remained.

On 18 February 1937, Sanger traveled from her home in Tucson to Phoenix to speak to a group of women about the birth control movement and its importance in Arizona. Lucy Cuthbert, Thelma Philips, Peggy Goldwater, Nancy Bimson, Blanche Korrick, Mary Alice Henderson, Edith Kinsolving, and Maie Heard, all wealthy Phoenix women devoted to philanthropic causes, met with Sanger and supported family planning. Six months later, on 1 October 1937, the Mother's Health Clinic opened in downtown Phoenix.

The Mother's Health Clinic was in a house with one exam room. The clinic was staffed and managed by volunteers and run by volunteer physician, Clyde Barker. Barker employed one paid nurse who worked with him in the clinic and provided women with contraceptive and prenatal information. Barker fitted women with diaphragms, a contraceptive flexible cup inserted into the vagina that prevented sperm from entering the cervix, and he supplied them with contraceptive spermicide, a jelly-like substance that inserted into the vagina to kill sperm. The clinic was open from 10 a.m. to noon, Monday to Saturday. Officially, the clinic treated only married women, because contraception was federally legal only for married women. However, some later speculated that the clinic discreetly served single women as well. Physicians could not legally provide single women with contraception until the US Supreme Court case *Eisenstadt v. Baird* in 1972 allowed them to.

The Mother's Health Clinic saw patients regardless of ethnic or racial background. Throughout the early 1900s, Arizona remained racially segregated, making it difficult for low-income minority women to receive reproductive care. Arizona had large Hispanic and African-American populations that had immigrated to Arizona for farming opportunities. However, prejudice and segregation throughout the US led to lack of healthcare and health education for minorities. Because they lacked access to healthcare, minorities had higher maternal and infant mortality rates than did whites. Most of the women seen in the clinic were immigrants or minorities. Additionally, the clinic served women regardless of their ability to pay. Women were encouraged to pay for services based on their family size and income, but most women received services at no cost. The clinic received no financial support from the government and relied completely on donations from private donors. In addition to large donations from the families of the original founding women, the clinic also had support from other local organizations, such as the Phoenix Business and Professional Women's Club.

Though birth control was federally legalized in 1936, Arizona had a 1901 territorial law that made illegal the dissemination within the state of material on sex, birth control, or deemed pornography illegal. Though the law remained largely unenforced until the mid-1900s, clinic founders and volunteers acted cautiously so as not to risk losing the clinic. Therefore, the clinic and its supporters didn't distribute information about clinic services, sexual and reproductive education, or the birth control movement. Naomi Kitchel, an early volunteer in the clinic, later recalled that they relied mainly on word-of-mouth to refer patients to the clinic. According to Peggy Goldwater, throughout the 1930s, birth control was viewed as an indecent topic to be discussed publicly or outside of marriage. Therefore, despite the legality of birth control, the clinic operated discretely.

While the clinic founders themselves could not distribute material about birth control, they advertised through newspapers that were willing to help them spread information about the clinic's resources. One of the clinic founders, Maie Heard, was the wife of Arizona Republic newspaper owner and publisher Dwight Heard. As the owner of a newspaper, Heard published several articles highlighting the resources that the clinic offered. Those articles detailed the initial opening of the clinic, the hours and services offered, and they described how the clinic was helping the immigrant and minority population that lacked access to reproductive healthcare.

Despite success in obtaining and maintaining a small patient base throughout the late 1930s, financial struggles during World War II imperiled the clinic. According to Melcher, throughout World War II, the birth control movement throughout the US slowed when female volunteers shifted their philanthropic energy into supporting soldiers abroad. In 1942, the Mother's Health Clinic merged with the national organization Planned Parenthood Federation of America. With the new affiliation, the clinic changed its name to Planned Parenthood Committee of Phoenix. Through growth and expansion into more of Arizona, the Planned Parenthood Committee of Phoenix eventually changed their name to the Planned Parenthood of Central and Northern Arizona. The Planned Parenthood Federation of America deemed the Mother's Health Clinic the founder of its Central and Northern Arizona chapter.

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