

Pro-lifers miffed at grand jury subpoenas in conspiracy probe

By Larry Witham
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Pro-life activists yesterday accused the Justice Department, which has vowed to ferret out people who bomb abortion clinics or shoot doctors, of aiming a grand jury probe at nonviolent activists.

The evidence of the probe is a subpoena delivered to a Northern Virginia pro-life organizer to appear before a grand jury at the U.S. District Court in Alexandria on Tuesday.

"Someone has been called to a grand jury without committing any violence," said the Rev. Patrick J. Mahoney, a former spokesman for Operation Rescue and director of the Christian Defense Coalition.

"This is a person engaged in First Amendment activities," he said. "What he has done is a lot of

residential picketing." He would not name the person.

A copy of the subpoena, provided by Mr. Mahoney, names Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert C. Chesnut of Alexandria, who referred inquiries to the Justice Department.

Justice officials, who do not comment on grand jury probes, did not return a phone call.

After the shooting of abortion doctors in Pensacola, Fla., and Wichita, Kan., last year, Attorney General Janet Reno vowed to investigate the possible nationwide coordination of shootings or arson at clinics.

In May, President Clinton signed into law the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, which allows prosecution of some nonviolent disruptions of clinics.

Paul Hill, convicted of murder

in two shooting deaths, including that of Dr. John B. Britton, at a Pensacola clinic, also was indicted in August under the clinic access act. He was sentenced to death last month for the two murders.

Rachelle "Shelley" Shannon, 37, was convicted of aggravated assault in March for the shooting last year of Dr. George Tiller in Wichita. In August, two grand juries also indicted her for involvement in a series of bombings nationwide.

The first case of arson in the country this year took place at a Falls Church clinic in August.

At the time, officials with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms said they had not found a national conspiracy to terrorize clinics since they began looking in 1982, but they noted that arson has

regional patterns.

"I think that the federal government should investigate possible connections between violence around the country," said Deborah Ellis, legal director of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York.

"Pro-choice groups have made calls for the government to investigate a possible anti-choice conspiracy," she said.

NOW had unsuccessfully filed anti-racketeering lawsuits against pro-life activists until the Supreme Court eventually returned one to a federal court in Chicago, where it now is pending.

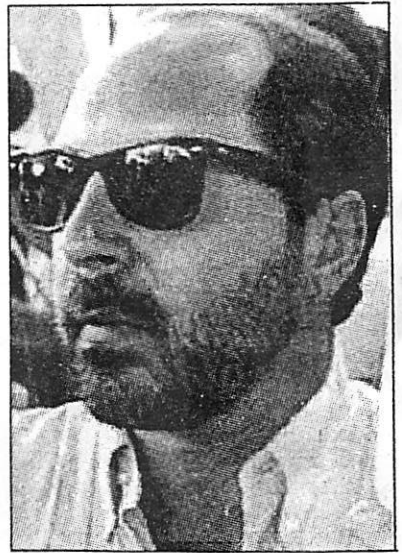
Mr. Mahoney said that pro-life activists "don't have a problem" with federal agencies trying to stop violent acts by seeking out perpetrators.

But yesterday, he sent a letter of complaint about probing non-violent activists to Tracy Toulou in the office of Jo Ann Harris, assistant attorney general-designate in the Justice Department criminal division.

After Miss Reno met with pro-life and pro-choice groups in October 1993, Mr. Toulou was designated liaison with Mr. Mahoney and others.

"After the grand jury appearance next week, we are going to ask the House and Senate judiciary committees to have oversight on these probes," Mr. Mahoney said. "They have become politicized."

Mr. Mahoney said he also has alerted all pro-life activist groups around the country to see if other subpoenas are afoot.



Patrick J. Mahoney