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New Va. law on abortion requires a 24-hour wait

By Gerald Mizejewski
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Under a hard-won law that took effect yesterday, women seeking abortions in Virginia must now wait 24 hours.

Virginia is the 16th state to enact an "informed consent" law requiring abortion providers to explain to women details about the procedure and wait at least a day before performing it.

"This will ensure that every woman in the commonwealth is empowered with information to make an informed choice," said Fiona Givens, a spokeswoman for the pro-life Virginia Society for Human Life.

The law, introduced by Delegate Robert F. McDonnell, Virginia Beach Republican, also requires doctors or nurses to explain in person or over the telephone the alternatives and risks in having an abortion and in carrying out a pregnancy.

A woman must be told how far along she is in her pregnancy, and be given the chance to speak with the physician and withdraw her consent at any time before the abortion. She must wait 24 hours after receiving the information before the abortion can be performed, except in an emergency.

Doctors who fail to comply could face a

\$2,500 civil penalty.

The General Assembly passed the law this year, the fifth consecutive year it came before lawmakers.

"The new law is an example of the government interfering in the relationship between the doctor and the patient," said David L. Nova, president and chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood of the Blue Ridge.

He said his group must divert its focus from the needs of women to the demands of the legislators and lawyers.

As part of the law, abortion providers must also make available information from the Virginia Health Department about considerations such as financial help, adoption and tips on parenting.

A technical problem has delayed the distribution of those materials until tomorrow, according to the Health Department.

The law is one of the few in Virginia that did not go into effect on July 1. The Health Department needed the extra time to develop its materials.

Meanwhile, more than 250 new laws took effect in Maryland yesterday. They include stiffer penalties for animal cruelty, a ban on dumping muck dredged from shipping chan-

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nels into the Chesapeake Bay, and the lowering of the state's standard for driving while intoxicated.

The blood-alcohol limit has been lowered from .1 percent to .08, a change lawmakers say will save lives and keep the state from losing needed highway funds. Maryland would have lost \$7 million in federal highway funds in 2004 had it not made the change.

Maryland has a two-tier system for drunken-driving offenses. Drivers who record .07 on a breath analysis test can be charged with driving under the influence, and face a two-month license suspension and a \$500 fine; those recording .08 can be charged with driving while intoxicated, and face a one-year suspension and a \$1,000 fine.

The District and 28 states — including Maryland and Virginia — comply with the federal .08 law. Maryland state Sen. Ida Ruben, Montgomery County Democrat, had

been trying for five years to lower the limit.

Under another new Maryland law, a jury can be told if a motorist refuses a breath analysis test.

Last year, 225 persons died in alcohol-related crashes in Maryland, representing 38 percent of the 588 total traffic fatalities, according to Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

The law on bay dumping capped a long battle over how the state should dispose of tons of mud dredged from channels each year in an effort to keep them open to shipping.

The state had wanted to use a site in open water above the Chesapeake Bay bridge, but the potential for major environmental contamination caused Gov. Parris N. Glendening's administration to back off and accept a ban on all open-water dumping.

The law will allow dredged material to be put on land or dumped into containment dikes to create new land.

■ *This article is based in part on wire service reports.*