

Good morning. My name is Dr. Anna Benvenuto and I am a board-certified OB/Gyn who has been practicing at Porter Medical Center in Middlebury for the past 10 years. I have also served as Porter's Chief Medical Officer for the last four. I testify today as a member of the Vermont Medical Society and a clinical leader with the University of Vermont Health Network.

As long as I have practiced or served in a leadership position, I have remained committed to providing a full-range of reproductive health care options to patients in our practice, including abortion. In a small community, our patients consistently express gratitude for the ability to receive the types of care that meets their needs in a compassionate and integrated way. While providing abortion care is valuable and necessary health care, it continues to unfortunately be contentious and politically charged. As an abortion provider, I am cognizant of the potential risks that come with that decision. I have had to make specific choices about privacy in order to create some protections for my family, knowing that violent and threatening acts are not isolated to providers.

I support S.37 for the protections from violence and litigation and threats of license discipline directed at health care providers who are engaging in evidence-based medicine. The bill would also help us keep malpractice coverage – already a challenge for many OBGYNs. I want to particularly express my concerns about the misinformation advanced in our community (and others) by the local so-called crisis pregnancy center. For example, in my community, the name of my practice is Porter Women's Health. The local CPC recently rebranded as "The Women's Center". This organization generates materials that are incredibly misleading. Many pregnant people in our community have felt deceived and confused by their interactions with the organization. They do not understand it is not a medical facility and that they are not receiving factual, medical information. I have seen people in my clinic who have received ultrasounds that have been inaccurate or have reviewed their website, seeking abortion services, only to receive what they characterized as coercive, anti-abortion counseling and inaccurate information such as reversing medication abortion, for which there is no approved treatment. As a physician who believes in honoring patient choice and creating care environments that support individual and evidence-based decision-making, it is infuriating that this type of organization is allowed to continue to operate in a manner that is deceptive and provides inaccurate counseling about health care.

Strengthening language that could result in the restriction or elimination of misleading practices that originate in crisis pregnancy centers is critically important at this time. I have been shocked by the way they have been able to generate and perpetuate untrue messages about the “services” they provide. I am consistently appalled by the way they have chosen office sites and changed the name of their organization to more closely match the location and names of Ob/Gyn practices. When their website was recently updated, there were new sections included specifically about abortion. Until you reach the very bottom, after they offer ultrasounds and visits for counseling, they mention they don’t provide abortion. Yet, when you google “abortion service, Middlebury, VT” they are the first option that comes up. Even savvy medical consumers have been misled by their website when seeking care, and I find it reprehensible and irresponsible that their misleading practices are allowed to continue.

Since I testified last, I received an outpouring of support and gratitude from healthcare providers across our region and heard from other staff and patients who were appreciative that our legislators, are taking up this important issue with the intention of protecting our healthcare providers, preserving access to vital healthcare and working to eliminate deceptive practices that harm our patients.

I would like to extend my personal gratitude for the courage and foresight of our legislators who are working on behalf of patients across our state- to both protect them from medical misinformation but also to advocate for the safety of our health care providers. Thank you for your time and support of this vital work.