

**Meagan Gallagher Testimony Before the Vermont House Committee
on Human Services – January 22, 2019**

Good afternoon Chairperson Pugh, Vice Chair Haas, Ranking Member McFaun, and members of the House Committee on Human Services. It is my privilege to be here today to voice my support for “H.57, an Act Relating to Preserving the Right to Abortion,” which would codify abortion rights in Vermont law.

My name is Meagan Gallagher, and I’m the President and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, or PPNNE.

PPNNE is the largest reproductive health care and sexuality education provider and advocate in northern New England. We serve more than 43,000 patients each year at 21 locations across Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

PPNNE was founded in 1965 when abortion was illegal, birth control use was prohibited in some states—even for married couples, and a woman needed her husband's permission to have her tubes tied.

Our mission is to provide, promote, and protect access to reproductive health care and sexuality education so that all people can make voluntary choices about their reproductive and sexual health.

In Vermont, there are 12 Planned Parenthood health centers and we provide health services to approximately 19,000 patients annually. Approximately eighty-seven percent (87%) of our patients identify as women, and 89% of them are under the age of 39.

Patients come to Planned Parenthood for the high quality, trauma informed, nonjudgmental, compassionate and confidential care and information they need and deserve.

In 2017, PPNNE in Vermont provided:

- a. Contraception to 9,600 patients;
- b. Nearly 4,800 pregnancy tests;
- c. Nearly 2,500 cervical cancer screenings;
- d. More than 3,500 breast exams;
- e. More than 37,000 sexually transmitted infection tests;
- f. And approximately 1,100 abortions.

Ten of our 12 Vermont health centers participate in the Title X federal family planning program. PPNNE is able to deliver care regardless of a patient's ability to pay because of the Title X program. In 2018, one-third of PPNNE's Vermont patients lived below the federal poverty level compared to the 11% of Vermont's total population that lived below the poverty level. Nearly 70% of our patients earn less than \$24,000 per year or 250% of the federal poverty level. The care for 46% of our patients is reimbursed through Vermont's Medicaid program.

PPNNE participates in a national patient satisfaction survey that benchmarks scores against thousands of other health care practices across the country. PPNNE consistently ranks above the 87th percentile in patient satisfaction demonstrating that patients are not only extremely satisfied with the care they receive at our health centers, they are more satisfied than the vast majority of patients receiving care at other providers.

During my 18 years at Planned Parenthood, I've never such direct treats to reproductive health and rights like we are seeing today. In the past two years, the Trump administration has shown

open hostility toward women's ability to access contraception and abortion. The administration has introduced policy measures that would allow employers to deny women birth control coverage and dismantle Title X, the one program meant to ensure that people with low-incomes can still access birth control, STD testing and treatments, cancer screenings, and other essential health care.

President Trump has also followed through on his campaign commitment to appoint justices to the United States Supreme Court only if they would reverse *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 court decision that legalized abortion in this country. With the confirmations of Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, abortion rights are on the line – the rights we've spent generations fighting for could disappear as soon as this year. If the *Roe* decision is overturned, the ability to access safe, legal abortion will be determined by the states.

Vermont currently has no laws affirmatively protecting abortion rights. Given the threat to federal protection of these rights, it is important that the Vermont legislature make its—and the people of Vermont's—position on this issue clear this legislative session. That is what “H.57 an Act Relating to Preserving the Right to Abortion” would do.

The bill “proposes to recognize as a fundamental right the freedom of reproductive choice and to prohibit public entities from interfering with or restricting the right of an individual to terminate the individual's pregnancy.” PPNNE firmly believes that each person is capable of—and must be trusted to—make their own health care decisions. The decision about one's pregnancy is up to the person who is pregnant, and only that person. There are many factors that contribute to someone's decision to have a family, or not, and each of us deserves the right to assess those factors for ourselves.

A person's ability to access safe and legal abortion when they need it is a critical component of their health and dignity, as well as independence, freedom, and equality. The ability to access contraception, as well as safe and legal abortion, allows women to participate fully in society. Many of the gains women have made in obtaining education, pursuing careers, moving closer to pay equity, and in having greater determination over the timing and spacing of their children—are the direct result of increased access to birth control and abortion.

According to the Pew Research Center, 70 percent of Vermonters support abortion rights. One in 4 women will have an abortion by the age of 45. In 2016, according to the Vermont Department of Health, there were nearly 1,300 abortions performed in Vermont. Abortion is a common, safe medical procedure and we must protect its legal status in Vermont law.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England applauds the introduction of “H.57, an Act Relating to Preserving the Right to Abortion.” We thank, and fully support, Vermont's House leadership for taking these historic and common-sense actions by introducing this bill. In particular, I'd like to thank House Human Service Committee Chair, Representative Ann Pugh, for being the lead sponsor of the bill.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England urges the House Committee on Human Services and the Vermont House of Representatives to pass H.57 to ensure that reproductive freedom is protected in Vermont.

Thank you.