

**Meagan Gallagher Testimony Before the Vermont Senate Committee
on Health and Welfare – April 17, 2019**

Good morning Chairperson Lyons, Vice Chair Westman, and Senators Cummings, Ingram, and McCormack. My name is Meagan Gallagher and I'm the President and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE).

If *Roe v. Wade* is overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court, the ability to access safe, legal abortion will be determined by the states. The rights we've spent generations fighting for could disappear as soon as this year, and today I'm here on behalf of PPNNE to fully support H.57, which would protect access to abortion care in Vermont law. On behalf of our patients, we must keep abortion legal, safe, and free from restrictions.

PPNNE is the largest reproductive health care and sexuality education provider in northern New England, where we serve more than 45,000 patients each year across Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. 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 percent (89%) of them are under the age of 39.

Patients come to Planned Parenthood for high quality, trauma-informed, nonjudgmental, compassionate and confidential care.

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.

The care we provide our patients is primary care, and for many of our patients, PPNNE is their only health care provider. Ten of our 12 Vermont health centers participate in the Title X federal family planning program. Because of this participation, PPNNE is able to deliver care regardless of a patient's ability to pay.

The decision to have an abortion is personal, and only the person who is pregnant can decide what is best for them. All PPNNE health centers have compassionate, professional staff who provide accurate information, and non-judgmental support. We're proud to provide confidential and expert health care to our patients, because the outcome of a strong provider-patient relationship is simple — to make sure our patients get the care they need.

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.

A PPNNE board member recently shared that a friend asked her if she would be arrested for having an abortion with the changes we've seen at the U.S. Supreme Court. This question is a reminder that many women of reproductive age do not know what their health care will look like if, and likely when, *Roe v. Wade* is overturned.

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 urges the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare to pass H.57 to ensure that reproductive freedom is protected in Vermont. We thank, and fully support, Vermont's Senate leadership for taking historic and common-sense actions to move this bill forward.

Thank you.