

**Meagan Gallagher Testimony Before the Vermont Senate Committee
on Health and Welfare – March 13, 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).

The rights we've spent generations fighting for could disappear as soon as this year. 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. Amending the Constitution of the State of Vermont to ensure that every Vermonter is afforded personal reproductive liberty is necessary to protect the health, dignity, and civil rights of all Vermonters.

It is my privilege to be here today to voice PPNNE's support for Proposition 5, the proposal that would amend the Constitution of the State of Vermont to ensure personal reproductive liberty.

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.

Yet the Trump Administration issued a final "gag rule" earlier this month that bans providers in the Title X program from telling millions of patients how they can safely and legally access abortion. The unethical gag rule undermines Title X, the only federal program dedicated to helping people with low incomes access affordable birth control and other preventive reproductive health care — including STD testing and treatment, and cancer screenings. This gag rule could impact nearly 10,000 Vermont patients who rely on Title X for affordable health care.

In the past two years, the Trump Administration has shown open hostility toward women's ability to access contraception and abortion, and reproductive freedom is under threat.

The Administration issued birth control rules which attempted to make it easier for employers to refuse to cover birth control in their health insurance plans. Without insurance, an IUD could cost more than \$1,300 out-of-pocket, and birth control pills could cost up to \$600 per year. Research shows that when people have access to birth control, they can take better care of themselves or their families, support themselves financially, complete their education, and advance in their careers.

Access to abortion care is also on the line. As soon as this year, the U.S. Supreme Court could overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 court decision that legalized abortion in this country. That decision would block millions of people from the health care they need. If *Roe* is overturned, one in three women of reproductive age could live in states where abortion is not only outlawed, but criminalized. This poses an immediate threat to women all across the country.

Title X coverage, birth control access, and abortion rights are each at risk of being turned upside down at the federal level, and then there are actions being taken at the state level.

In the decades since the *Roe* decision, individual states have enacted a slew of restrictions to make it as cumbersome as possible to offer patients abortion care.

One way states regulate abortions is to impose legal requirements on health care facilities that offer abortion care. These legal requirements, known as Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider or TRAP laws, apply exclusively to abortion providers and mandate additional requirements not applied to other health care practices. These include arbitrary requirements such as on the width of hallways. These regulations do nothing to improve the quality of patient care. Oftentimes, these restrictions are so expensive that the costs of implementing them cause health centers to close down, which is of course, the goal of the laws.

According to a 2017 study by the Center for Reproductive Rights and Ibis Reproductive Health, states with the highest number of abortion restrictions tend to have the worst health outcomes for women and children, and the fewest supportive policies that would actually advance the health and well-being of families. The report found that many of the states that have the highest number of restrictions included in the research— Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas —have dramatically fewer policies that would truly address the challenges women and their families face.

Since 2011, politicians have passed more than 400 new state abortion restrictions that shame, pressure, and punish people who have decided to have an abortion. Since January 2018, [37 states have introduced over 300 abortion restrictions](#). Out of this total, 26 new abortion restrictions were enacted in 11 states. Currently, 20 states are poised to ban access to abortion should *Roe* be overturned, threatening access for more than 25 million women. That's more than a third of women of reproductive age in this country.

Many state lawmakers continue to consider and enact abortion bans that fly in the face of constitutional standards and *Roe*'s precedent, but these laws will remain in effect unless there is court action to reverse them.

Some bans are designed to be “triggered” and take effect automatically or by swift state action if *Roe* is overturned. Several states even have laws declaring the state's intent to ban abortion to whatever extent is permitted by the U.S. Constitution, making their desire to halt abortion access in the state clear.

According to the Pew Research Center, [70 percent of Vermonters support abortion rights](#).

Vermont currently has no laws affirmatively protecting abortion rights. Given the threat to these rights at the federal level, it is important the Vermont legislature makes its position known on

reproductive rights. Amending the constitution to ensure that every Vermonter is afforded personal reproductive liberty will make it crystal clear where Vermont stands.

The proposed constitutional amendment says, “The right to reproductive liberty is central to the exercise of personal autonomy and involves decisions people should be able to make free from compulsion of the State.” PPNNE firmly believes that each person is capable of—and must be trusted to—make their own health care decisions.

Reproductive liberty is a civil rights issue. The proposed amendment upholds the will of Vermonters – the right of all people to health, dignity, independence, and freedom to determine their own life’s course as it relates to reproductive freedom.

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.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England applauds the introduction of PR.5, the proposal to amend the Vermont Constitution to ensure that every Vermonter is afforded personal reproductive liberty. We thank, and fully support, Vermont’s Senate leadership for taking this action by introducing this amendment.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England urges the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare and the entire Senate to pass PR.5 to ensure that reproductive liberty is protected in Vermont.

Thank you.