

Honorable Members of the Vermont Senate Health and Wellness Committee:

Thank you for accepting my written testimony, read by nurse midwife Elina Koumjian, while I am traveling out of the country.

My name is Dr. Heidi Rinehart. I am a board-certified obstetrician-gynecologist practicing at Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene. I serve on the New Hampshire Midwifery Council and previously served on the Licensed Midwives Advisory Board in the State of New Mexico, meaning that I have been involved in the oversight of midwives who practice in birth centers in both states. I was affiliated with a free-standing birth center for 6 years and have attended births in that setting. I am intimately aware of the differences in physical plant and practice patterns between a hospital labor and delivery unit and a free-standing birth center. I have worked with birth center midwives since 1988, providing consultation and hospital care for those clients who need them. I chose a free-standing birth center for the birth of my daughter Julianna.

I endorse passage of S-0204 to enable licensure of free-standing birth centers in Vermont.

Free-standing birth centers in Vermont will expand citizens' birth options for families. Benefits of birth centers for Vermonters include: low-tech, high-touch childbirth services with significantly lower cost, higher satisfaction, and many fewer obstetrical interventions, including fewer C-sections when compared to hospital birth. And this is achieved with equivalent health outcomes for babies and better health outcomes for pregnant people.

Having attended births AND given birth myself in all three settings – home, birth center, hospital – I can attest that free-standing birth centers provide a unique service that cannot be replicated in an institutional setting, like a hospital. Birth centers can provide rural Vermonters with the gentleness and intimacy of a home birth in a setting that has better access to a hospital. Birth centers are not hospitals and need to be licensed, regulated and reimbursed suited to their unique role in a well-integrated health care system. The services and physical plant of birth centers cannot be adequately regulated under existing facility licenses in Vermont. Senate Bill S-0204 establishes a mechanism for licensing and regulating free-standing birth centers and I endorse its passage.