

April 27, 2011

Secretary Kathleen Sebelius
US Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 615F
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Madame Secretary:

We appreciate your strong leadership and consistent advocacy for comprehensive healthcare, including access to reproductive healthcare services. However, we were extremely disappointed to see the report of your recent statements regarding federal funding for abortion services in the United States (*Politico*, April 8, 2011). Your statement, “[f]ederal funds have never supported abortion, do not support abortion, will not support abortion,” ignores the basic reality that, for many poor women in the United States, federal funding for abortion services is critical to ensuring a level playing field and equal access for all when it comes to safe and legal abortion.

Our organizations strive to ensure safe, affordable access to the full range of reproductive health services, including abortion, for all women in the US, no matter their circumstance. As such, we cannot support policies that adversely affect poor women and their ability to access the healthcare they and their families need. Denying federal funding for abortion does just that: it targets low-income women who too often struggle to afford an abortion. The average cost of an abortion in the first trimester is \$468, which for many women and their families is beyond the reach of affordability, especially in this difficult economic climate. This means that low-income women and families sacrifice food, clothing, and shelter in order to cover the cost of an abortion. Tens of thousands of women every year simply cannot raise enough to cover the cost and are denied the ability to make their own decision about whether and when to have a child. Our commitment to women’s health and reproductive justice for all compels us to speak out against this discriminatory policy, and we ask you to do the same.

We expect that the policy of a Democratic administration and agency would support the capacity of all women to make moral decisions about whether or not to continue a pregnancy. In fact, the Party platform in 2008 stated that:

“The Democratic Party strongly and unequivocally supports *Roe v. Wade* and a woman’s right to choose a safe and legal abortion, regardless of ability to pay, and we oppose any and all efforts to weaken or undermine that right.”

For the many women and their families whose healthcare coverage is directly connected to the federal government, including federal employees, women in military families, those covered by the Indian Health Service and those who are enrolled in Medicaid, the ability to pay for the healthcare services they need is intrinsically linked to federal funding. As you know, there are, in fact, exceptions in current law which allow federal funds to be used to support women who need abortions, however rarely these exceptions might be utilized. We are concerned that your comments further stigmatize those women who might be eligible for funding from even trying to navigate the process intended to help them.

Today, more than ever, low-income women in the United States must have access to the resources that allow them to determine the size of their families or when and whether to start a family. Many of these women are already balancing the demands of jobs, children, school, diminishing paychecks and the disproportionate burden of an economic downturn. Abortion funding restrictions are often insurmountable obstacles for women with limited resources. Removing these barriers is the first step to true healthcare reform, to abolishing class- and race-based discrimination, and to placing control, dignity and self-determination back in the hands of the women to whom it belongs.

As Secretary of Health and Human Services, it is your responsibility to “protect the health of all Americans and provide essential human services, especially for those who are least able to help themselves.” By denying even the possibility that federal funds will be used for abortion services, you are dividing our citizens: on one side those who can afford the healthcare they need, and on the other, those who are denied this most basic ability. While abortion funding restrictions are currently in place, this has not always been the case, and we believe that we can, with strong leadership and political will, remove those restrictions and restore critical personal decision-making to every woman. We urge you to consider the power your voice has on shaping the debate in this area and ask that in the future, your comments on abortion access at least acknowledge the damaging impact funding bans have on the lives of low-income women, women of color and their families.

We stand ready to offer any assistance our organizations may provide, individually or collectively, to help achieve our shared goals. To that end, we would like to request a meeting with you to discuss these issues and to elaborate on what we believe the Administration can do to further strong support for reproductive health services. We look forward to meeting with you and together finding ways we might be helpful moving forward. Please contact Catholics for Choice at 202-986-6093, or National Network of Abortion Funds at 617-267-7162, with any questions or should you or your staff need additional information.

Respectfully,

Abortion Access Project, Inc.
Abortion Rights Fund of Western Massachusetts
Abortion Support Network
ACCESS Women’s Health Justice
Advocates for Youth
Atlanta ProChoice Action Committee
Black Women for Reproductive Justice
Broward County Chapter of the National Organization for Women
Broward Women’s Emergency Fund
Catholics for Choice
Cedar River Clinics/Feminist Women’s Health Center of Washington State
Center for Reproductive Rights
Center for Women Policy Studies
Cherry Hill Women’s Center
Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program at Hampshire College
Democratic Women’s Club of Northeast Broward
Emergency Medical Assistance, Inc.

Feminist Abortion Network
Feminist Women's Health Center of Atlanta, Georgia
Feminist Women's Health Centers of California
Hartford Gyn Center
Ibis Reproductive Health
Ipas
It's Your Choice Fund
Law Students for Reproductive Justice
Legal Voice
Lilith Fund, Inc.
Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center
Make A Difference Fund
Medical Students for Choice
National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum
National Council of Jewish Women
National Institute for Reproductive Health
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
National Network of Abortion Funds
National Organization for Women
National Women's Health Network
Oklahoma Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health
Planning Alternatives for Change
Preterm
Pro-Choice Resources
Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Religious Institute
Reproductive Health Access Project
Reproductive Health Technologies Project
SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective
South Mountain Women's Health Alliance
Southwest Women's Law Center
Texas Equal Access Fund
The Freedom Fund
Third Wave Foundation's Emergency Abortion Fund
Trust Women Fund
Women Have Options
Women's Emergency Network
Women's Medical Fund
Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project