

March 29, 2017

Committee on the Judiciary  
Rhode Island House of Representatives  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chairman Keable, Vice Chairperson Ajello and members of the Committee,

On behalf of Catholics for Choice, I urge you to oppose HB 5100, HB 5158, and HR 5399, proposals before you today that seek to restrict access to reproductive healthcare services. I also urge you to support HB 5343 and HB 5830, alternative proposals that respect the ability of all Rhode Islanders to make their own decisions, according to their own consciences, about their reproductive healthcare needs.

There are more than 620,000 Catholics in Rhode Island—59 percent of the population. Following our faith's traditions of respect for conscience, social justice and religious pluralism, the majority of Catholics in Rhode Island and, in fact, across the United States support access to comprehensive healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare. Catholics oppose policies that impede access to these vital services.

As Catholics, we are called by our faith to follow our conscience in all matters of moral decision-making and to respect the rights of others to do the same. This includes a woman's right to make decisions about her reproductive healthcare. Catholics' respect for conscience leads us to support the conscience-based decisions that each person makes, regardless of how we might make that decision ourselves. A majority of Catholics believe that abortion should be legal in the United States, and six in ten Catholics believe abortion can be a moral choice.<sup>1</sup>

Our Catholic social justice tradition compels us to advocate for the poor and marginalized. We know that policies that create barriers to reproductive healthcare access disproportionately harm those who struggle the most to make ends meet during these tough economic times, as well as those in rural areas. Out of respect for the dignity of all people, including the poorest and most marginalized, Catholics support access to the full range of reproductive healthcare services, including abortion, without unnecessary burdens.

**PRESIDENT**

Jon O'Brien

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Rhode Island, founded on the principal of separation of church and state, cannot and should not bow to the demands of a vocal minority—represented by the Rhode Island Catholic Conference— seeking your help in codifying its personal beliefs about abortion for the entire population. Rather, Rhode Island must continue its tradition of allowing women and men to make moral decisions about their own lives according to their own individual conscience.

Our Catholic faith, true to the same principles upon which Rhode Island itself was founded, charges us to respect religious pluralism and religious freedom. Religious freedom is an expansive rather than restrictive idea. It has two sides: freedom of religion and freedom from religion. It is not about telling people what they can and cannot believe or practice, but rather about respecting an individual's right to follow his or her own conscience in religious beliefs and practices, as well as in any moral decision. This respect for the beliefs and practices of all people extends to those making decisions about their reproductive healthcare, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, based on their own religious beliefs and moral convictions. Proposals like HB 5100, HB 5158 and HR 5399 try to codify one religious viewpoint into law, trampling on our long-standing respect for religious pluralism and true religious freedom.

Many of the proposals before you are extreme. They allow antichoice legislators—not those individuals directly involved in each pregnancy—to decide whether and when women can access abortion care. These onerous proposals represent an affront to the political beliefs and personal practices of Rhode Island Catholics and to our Catholic tradition's respect for conscience, social justice and religious pluralism.

On the other hand, measures like HB 5343 and HB 5830 ensure that each and every woman in Rhode Island, no matter her faith or income, can make the conscience-based decision that is best for her and her family.

You may have heard from the Diocese of Providence or other organizations claiming to speak on behalf of all Catholics on the proposals before you today. I assure you that their extreme positions on these issues do not represent the majority of Catholics in Rhode Island, or across the US. Having failed to convince Catholics in the pews, the Diocese of Providence, along with its conservative allies, is asking you to legislate the bishops' personal beliefs about abortion and impose them on every citizen of Rhode Island.

Catholics in Rhode Island and across the country support access to the full range of reproductive health services, including abortion. We, and they, hope that you will have the courage to oppose measures that would reduce access to reproductive healthcare services and ask you to instead support policies that allow men and women to make their own decisions regarding their reproductive health.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon O'Brien". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

Jon O'Brien  
President  
Catholics for Choice

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<sup>1</sup> Belden Russonello Strategists, "Survey of Catholic Likely Voters Conducted for Catholics for Choice," September 2016.