

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

April 10, 2018

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

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

On behalf of Catholics for Choice, I wish to express my strongest support for the Reproductive Health Care Act ("RHCA," H 7625) before you today. For over forty years, Catholics for Choice has served as a voice for the majority of the faithful in the Catholic church who believe that our tradition supports a woman's right to follow her conscience on important moral matters, including reproductive health decisions. Throughout the world, we strive to be an expression of Catholicism as it is lived by ordinary people and to advance sound public policy, rooted in true religious liberty.

Catholic teaching regards conscience as the final moral arbiter. We regard it as both a gift and responsibility such that in all matters of moral decision-making, we are called upon to follow our consciences and to respect the rights of others to do the same. It is not our place to supplant the moral discernment of our neighbor with our own, regardless of whether we would come to the same conclusion ourselves.

More than 620,000 Catholics call Rhode Island home, making it the only state in the nation where a majority of its residents are affiliated with the church. Catholics support the ability of each woman to choose the reproductive healthcare that is right for her, as a matter of her conscience. 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.ⁱ It should come as no surprise that these beliefs are reflected in practice, as Catholic women access abortion at rates identical to those of other faiths and of none.ⁱⁱ

Opponents of the RHCA have circulated much disinformation about the effects of the bill. To be clear, the Act would render state law consistent with the main principles of *Roe v. Wade*,ⁱⁱⁱ the US Supreme Court ruling that establishes the constitutional right to abortion, and repeal several statutes that have been held unconstitutional by the courts. It would also protect access to contraception in Rhode Island, regardless of what happens nationally with continuous efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA). As the threat to these protections grows, I call upon this committee to stand affirmatively for women's conscience and the moral autonomy of all Rhode Island women seeking to make deeply personal decisions about their reproductive futures.

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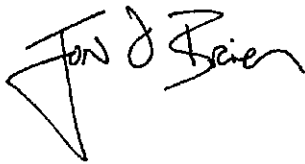
Rosemary Radford Ruether,
Emerita

Finally, it bears remembering that Rhode Island was founded on the principle of separation of church and state. Our Catholic faith, in keeping with this vision of a just society, charges us to respect religious pluralism and religious freedom. Religious freedom is an expansive rather than restrictive idea, encompassing both the freedom of and freedom from religion. It is not about telling people what they can and cannot believe or practice, but rather about respecting each person's right to live according to their own values and precepts.

Few decisions are more personal than choosing whether and when to become a parent. True religious freedom requires us to respect all people's reproductive health decisions, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, based on their religious beliefs and moral convictions. I urge you to resist the pressure of a vocal minority—be it the Rhode Island Catholic Conference or anti-choice groups spreading misinformation about the RHCA—who seek your help in restricting the moral autonomy, of their neighbors. Rather, Rhode Island must continue its tradition of allowing each person to make moral decisions about their own lives according to their individual conscience.

The proper role of government in this country is not to privilege one set of religious views over others even when or perhaps especially when one religion is a majority. The Catholics Bishops' views reflect theirs and not those of all or even the majority of Catholics or Rhode Islanders. The proper role of government is to protect each person's right to make decisions according to their own beliefs and values, not just the vocal and powerful. I urge this committee to support the RHCA in recognition of Rhode Island women's moral autonomy and capacity for self-determination.

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

ⁱ Belden Russonello Strategists, "American Attitudes on Religious Exemptions: In Theory and In Practice," conducted for the American Civil Liberties Union and Catholics for Choice, October 2012.

ⁱⁱ Guttmacher Institute, "Characteristics of US Abortion Patients, 2014," <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014>.

ⁱⁱⁱ 410 U.S. 113 (1973).