

# CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

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## IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

March 4, 2019

Rhode Island Senate  
Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chairperson Prata, Vice Chairperson Archambault, Secretary Metts 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," S 152) before you today. For more than 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.

More than 621,000 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 each woman's ability to choose the reproductive healthcare that is right for her. 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>i</sup> It should come as no surprise that these beliefs are reflected in practice, as Catholic women access abortion and contraception at rates identical to those of other faiths and those who do not identify with any particular faith.<sup>ii</sup>

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*<sup>iii</sup> (the US Supreme Court ruling that establishes the constitutional right to abortion) as well as repeal several statutes that have been deemed unconstitutional by the courts. It would also protect access to contraception in Rhode Island, regardless of what happens nationally with programs like Title X and the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which are under relentless attack. As the threat to these protections grows, I call upon this committee to stand affirmatively for the moral autonomy of all Rhode Island women seeking to make deeply personal decisions about their reproductive futures according to their own conscience.

*(more)*

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Jon O'Brien

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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 own religious beliefs and moral convictions. I urge you to resist the intimidation and pressure of a vocal minority—be it the Rhode Island Catholic Conference or anti-choice groups spreading misinformation about the RHCA—that seek your help in restricting the moral autonomy of their neighbors. Rather, Rhode Island must continue its honorable tradition of "holding forth liberty of conscience" by 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 Catholic Bishops' views are not reflective of all, or even the majority, of Rhode Island Catholics' views. 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 women's moral autonomy and capacity for self-determination. It is the right thing to do.

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

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

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

<sup>iii</sup> 410 U.S. 113 (1973).