

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

March 15, 2019

Illinois General Assembly
Committee on Human Services
705 Stratton Building
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Chairperson Hurley, Vice-Chairperson Hammond and members of the Committee,

On behalf of Catholics for Choice, I wish to express my strongest support for the Reproductive Health Act (HB 2495) 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.

Most of the 3.4 million Catholics who reside in Illinois (27 percent of the state's total population) value freedom of choice and 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.ⁱ 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 the general population.ⁱⁱ

Catholic teaching regards conscience as the final moral arbiter. 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—that's not social justice. In keeping with this vision of a just society, our faith charges us to respect religious pluralism and to embrace an expansive view of religious freedom that encompasses both the freedom of and freedom from religion, respecting each person's right to live according to their own values and precepts.

Illinois boasts a proven record of protecting the conscience-based decision making of its residents. The Reproductive Health Act would secure that legacy. It would protect abortion access in Illinois, ensuring that every individual has a fundamental right to make decisions about their own reproductive health according to their conscience. It would also protect both patients and providers from unjust legal prosecution and safeguard access to contraception, sterilization and abortion, regardless of what happens nationally. With programs like Title X and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) facing relentless attacks, I call upon this committee to stand affirmatively for the moral autonomy of Illinois women in making deeply personal decisions about their reproductive futures according to their own conscience.

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Few decisions are more personal than choosing whether and when to become a parent. True religious freedom requires us to respect the reproductive health decisions of *all* people, 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 Illinois Catholic Conference or antichoice groups spreading misinformation about the Reproductive Health Act— that seek your help in restricting the moral autonomy of their neighbors.

The views of the Catholic bishops are not reflective of the majority of Illinois Catholics. The proper role of government in this country is not to privilege one set of religious views over others, however vocal and powerful their proponents may be. Rather, our government was instituted to protect each person's right to make decisions according to their own beliefs and values. I urge this committee to support the Reproductive Health Act in recognition of women's moral autonomy and capacity for self-determination. It is the right thing to do.

Sincerely,

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>.