

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

August 3, 2015

Barack Obama  
President  
The United States of America  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Your administration has demonstrated a laudable commitment to the health and wellbeing of women and girls, both in the United States and abroad. In light of your recent trip to Ethiopia and Kenya, we ask that you take swift action to end the unduly strict interpretation of the Helms Amendment and continue your legacy of action to better the lives of women worldwide. Specifically, we urge you to issue guidance to the State Department, USAID and other relevant agencies to clarify that the Helms Amendment permits exceptions in the events of rape, incest or danger to a woman's life.

For more than four decades, the Helms Amendment has prevented the world's most vulnerable women from accessing critically needed health services. This amendment prohibits the use of U.S. foreign assistance for "the performance of abortion as a method of family planning." Since its initial passage in 1973, that language has been incorrectly construed as an outright ban on the use of U.S. aid for abortion services.

That interpretation is both overly restrictive and inconsistent with established legal precedent. The Hyde Amendment, which bars Medicaid, Medicare and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage of abortion care, permits exceptions in the events of rape, incest or life endangerment. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, the same exceptions were extended to federally-funded health insurance coverage for women in the armed forces. Last year, the House and Senate's FY 2015 State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills allowed for the same exceptions for volunteers in the Peace Corps. Failing to extend those exceptions to women outside of the United States does not align with precedent or Congressional intent.

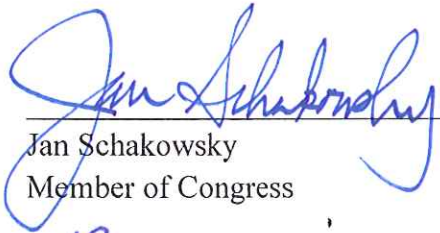
Kenya and Ethiopia are among the 24 USAID priority countries in which 70% of worldwide maternal deaths occur. They also both have very high rates of sexual violence; Ethiopia, in particular, has one of the world's highest rates of violence against women. In these two countries, U.S. policy continues to be a barrier between women and the care that they need.

Around the world, about 289,000 deaths occur each year due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, 13% of which result from unsafe abortion. By making it harder for women to access safe abortion care, the Helms Amendment – and particularly the overly restrictive interpretation of this policy currently in place -- puts the lives of women at risk.

We encourage you to take this opportunity to ensure that the U.S. is correctly implementing the Helms Amendment. The clarification we seek would require only the use of existing authority, and would not interfere with sovereign local laws. It would merely allow the U.S., in limited cases, to provide the world's most vulnerable women with the care they need and are legally entitled to in their countries. Such a change would bring foreign policy into line with domestic policy and help ensure that women around the world have access to a minimum level of care.

President Obama, you have been a tireless leader and champion for the rights of women and girls, both here in the United States and around the world. We urge you to act immediately to end the overly restrictive and extremely harmful implementation of the Helms amendment, and in doing so, to help save the lives of women and girls around the world.

Sincerely,



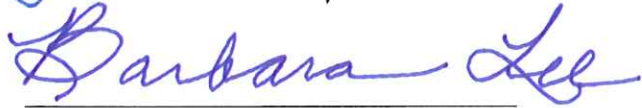
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Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress



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Eliot L. Engel  
Member of Congress



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Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress



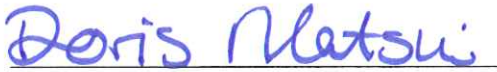
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Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress



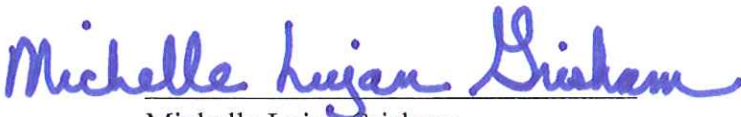
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Gwen Moore  
Member of Congress



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Doris Matsui  
Member of Congress



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Michelle Lujan Grisham  
Member of Congress



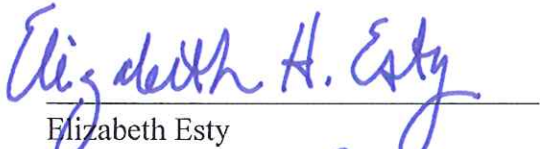
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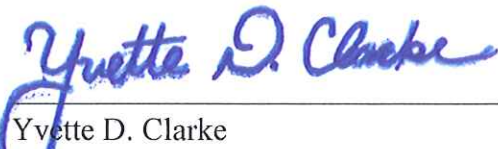
Lois Capps  
Member of Congress

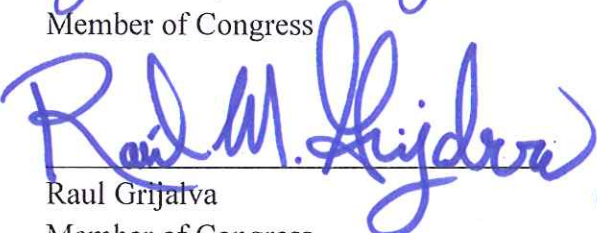


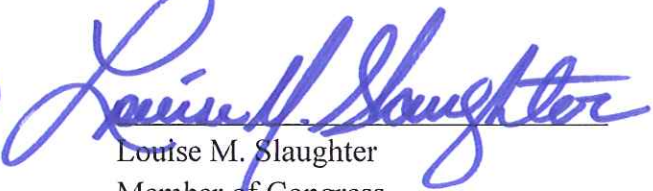
  
James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

  
Sam Farr  
Member of Congress


  
Elizabeth Esty  
Member of Congress

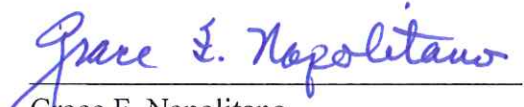
  
Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress

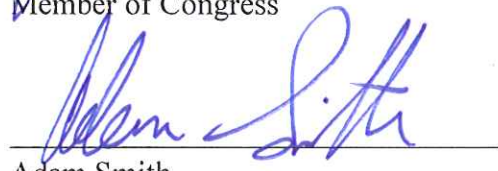
  
Raul Grijalva  
Member of Congress


  
Louise M. Slaughter  
Member of Congress

  
Diana DeGette  
Member of Congress

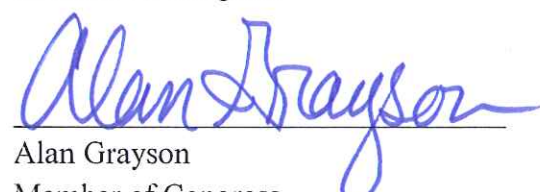
  
Jerrold Nadler  
Member of Congress


  
Grace F. Napolitano  
Member of Congress

  
Adam Smith  
Member of Congress

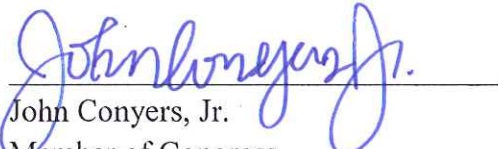
  
Mark Takai  
Member of Congress

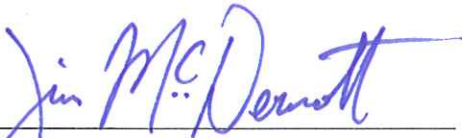
  
Jackie Speier  
Member of Congress

  
Alan Grayson  
Member of Congress

  
Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

  
Betty McCollum  
Member of Congress

  
John Conyers, Jr.  
Member of Congress



Jim McDermott  
Member of Congress



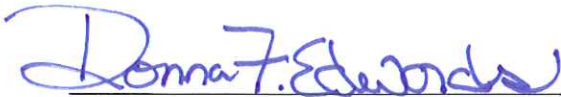
Keith Ellison  
Member of Congress




Chris Van Hollen  
Member of Congress



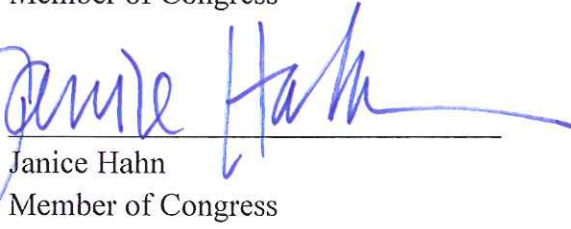
Derek Kilmer  
Member of Congress



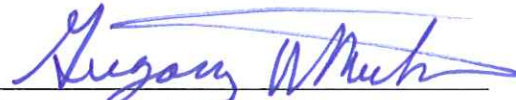
Donna F. Edwards  
Member of Congress



Robin L. Kelly  
Member of Congress



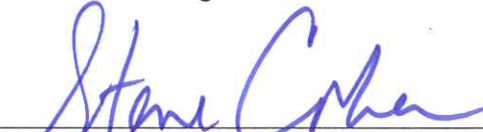
Janice Hahn  
Member of Congress



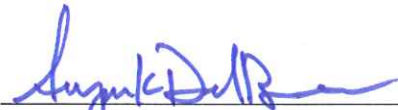
Gregory Meeks  
Member of Congress



Alan Lowenthal  
Member of Congress



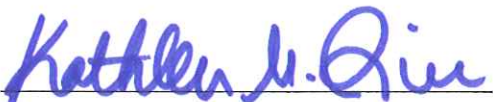
Steve Cohen  
Member of Congress



Suzan DelBene  
Member of Congress



Earl Blumenauer  
Member of Congress



Kathleen M. Rice  
Member of Congress



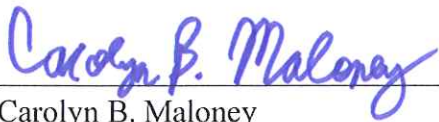
Beto O'Rourke  
Member of Congress



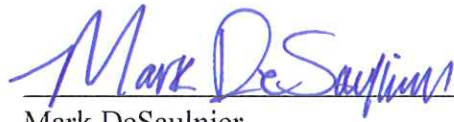
David Price  
Member of Congress



Brian Higgins  
Member of Congress



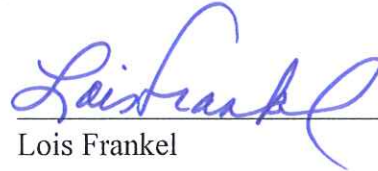
Carolyn B. Maloney  
Member of Congress



Mark DeSaulnier  
Member of Congress



Judy Chu  
Member of Congress



Lois Frankel  
Member of Congress



Ted Deutch  
Member of Congress



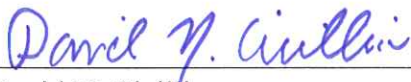
Cedric Richmond  
Member of Congress



Mark Takano  
Member of Congress



Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress



David N. Cicilline  
Member of Congress



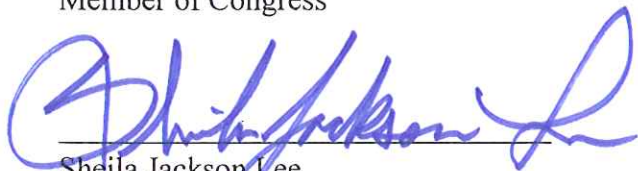
Scott Peters  
Member of Congress



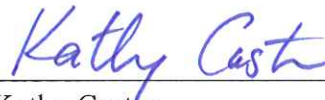
Rosa L. DeLauro  
Member of Congress



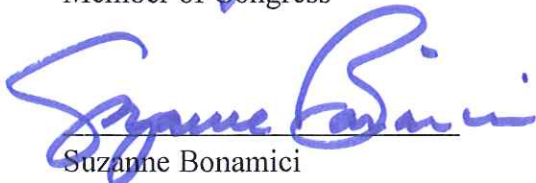
Dina Titus  
Member of Congress



Sheila Jackson Lee  
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor  
Member of Congress



Suzanne Bonamici  
Member of Congress

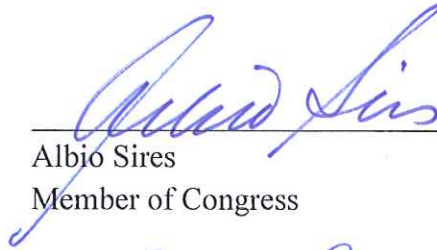


Brad Sherman  
Member of Congress





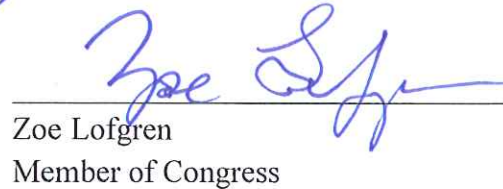
Rick Larsen  
Member of Congress



Albio Sires  
Member of Congress



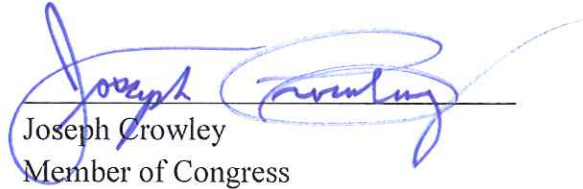
Mike Quigley  
Member of Congress



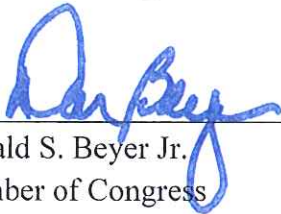
Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress



Joseph P. Kennedy  
Member of Congress



Joseph Crowley  
Member of Congress



Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress



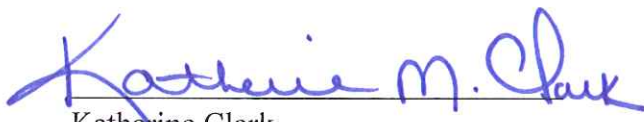
Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
Member of Congress



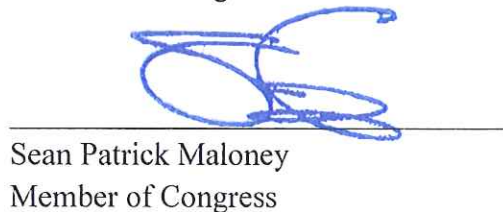
Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress



Peter DeFazio  
Member of Congress



Katherine Clark  
Member of Congress



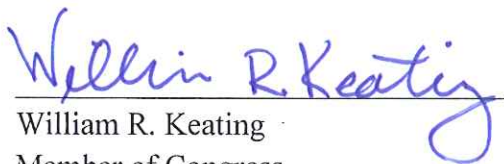
Sean Patrick Maloney  
Member of Congress



Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress



Tim Ryan  
Member of Congress



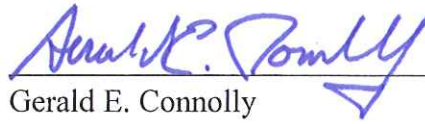
William R. Keating  
Member of Congress



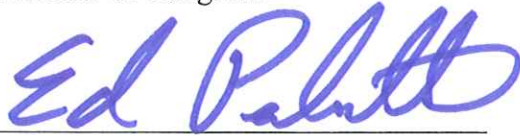
Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Member of Congress



Paul Tonko  
Member of Congress



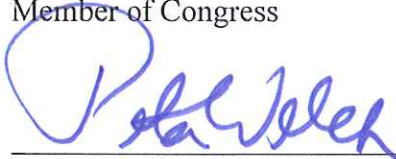
Gerald E. Connolly  
Member of Congress



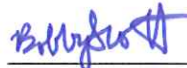
Ed Perlmutter  
Member of Congress



Dave Loebsack  
Member of Congress



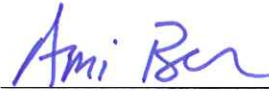
Peter Welch  
Member of Congress



Bobby Scott  
Member of Congress



Karen Bass  
Member of Congress



Ami Bera, M.D.  
Member of Congress



Michael M. Honda  
Member of Congress