

Health

Religious Groups, Health Workers Criticize Proposed Changes to State Abortion Rules

— Laura Arman, 9.4.2024



People attend a hearing regarding the proposed changes to Connecticut's abortion rules on Sept. 4, 2024, in Hartford (CT Examiner).

HARTFORD — Religious groups and health care workers are speaking

out against proposed changes to Connecticut's existing abortion regulations.

The state Department of Public Health is **proposing changes** that would remove religious exemptions for providers refusing to perform abortions, eliminate safeguards for newborns showing signs of life post-abortion, and lift the restriction on third-trimester abortions, allowing them to be performed for reasons beyond just preserving the life or health of the mother.

Public comments on the revisions were initially rejected by the legislature's Regulatory Review Committee this summer, but were reopened on Aug. 19 and will run through Sept. 20.

At a Wednesday hearing in Hartford, Torrington resident and Connecticut Foundation to Abolish Abortion member Steven Thompson, said, "I'm here as an ambassador of Jesus Christ. Abortion is not reproductive health care, it is the murder of the most innocent, fragile and defenseless human children in Connecticut."

"Equal justice for all means equal protection under the law," he added. "All human life must be protected equally under the law. A person's value does not come from their size, level of development, environment, or degree of dependency."

Abortion is legal in the state if performed before fetal viability, which is when a fetus can survive outside the womb. While the timing of fetal viability can vary, it generally occurs around 24 weeks of pregnancy.

Susan Baker, a registered nurse, said if the religious exemption protection is removed, many medical professionals will face a difficult choice between their deeply held beliefs and their jobs.

"Most of us go into the medical field because we want to preserve life, not

end it,” she said. “Each has their own reasons for making that decision, but the state and federal law must protect the rights of medical professionals to refuse performing abortion.”

In **2022**, there were more than 11,000 abortions reported in Connecticut, a 10% jump from 2021. An estimated 16 abortion are performed per 1,000 Connecticut women between the ages of 15 and 44.

Approximately 70% of abortions were chemical, and more than a quarter were conducted surgically.

Nearly a third of these procedures were performed on women in their 30s, mostly in their first trimester — 12 weeks gestation or earlier.

Liz Gustafson, the Connecticut state director of Reproductive Equity Now, said the three provisions were “medically unnecessary” and eliminating them would enhance the current medical standard.

“Abortion is a medical procedure, and our regulations on abortion should reflect that,” State Rep. Jillian Gilchrest, D-West Hartford, co-chair of the Reproductive Rights Caucus, told CT Examiner.

Gilchrest said the three provisions are outdated because they were put in place in 1990 and should be modernized.

“The regulations that the department is considering have to do with a medical procedure, and so religious ideology and beliefs shouldn’t influence those decisions.” she said.

But one attendee, Tiffany Hernandez, said she is grateful for a chance at life.

“My mom was sexually assaulted, not only by people outside of the family, but she was actually sexually assaulted by her own father,”

Hernandez told CT Examiner.

Hernandez's mother had her first child when she was 17 or 18 years old, and a second at 19 with no support from her family while facing homelessness.

"She left the situation and found herself in a new relationship that was also abusive, and so she fled and ended up in homeless housing at the time that she got pregnant with me," Hernandez said. "Everyone was pretty much telling her, 'You're homeless, you already have two young children, you cannot afford to have another child.'"

Hernandez said her mother initially scheduled an abortion appointment but did not follow through with it.

Hernandez, now 27, believes her mother had a greater spiritual moral compass.

"I didn't grow up in faith ... and I really started to see the true value of life, my own life, other people's life, and what true love is. That's what made me change my position from pro-choice and pro-life," Hernandez said. "I think that we shouldn't be the ones to play God in our life."

Gilchrest argued that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, but it should not inform science and medical decisions.

It's unclear whether DPH will make any changes.

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