



Office of State Representative Stephanie Howse
House District II

Sponsor Testimony of Representative Stephanie Howse
Regarding House Bill 234
Before House Criminal Justice Committee
Wednesday, November 1, 2017

Good Afternoon Chair Manning, Vice Chair Rezabek, Ranking Member Celebreeze and members of the Criminal Justice Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony today on House Bill 234. HB 234 seeks to protect reproductive health providers, their employees, and the patients who come to them for health care from harassment and intimidation. I will speak on the portion of the bill that prohibits the blocking of reproductive health care facilities and creates protective buffer zones to ensure that patients can access care without harassment and intimidation.

HB 234 establishes a balance between those who choose to protest at these facilities and the rights of patients who come seeking legally protected medical care. It will not forbid anyone from protesting outside the clinic or attempting to give information to patients, it will stop behavior that crosses the line from legally protected protest to harassment, intimidation and obstruction.

Specifically, the legislation will outlaw:

- The obstruction or blocking of the premise of a reproductive health care facility.
- Attempting to stop someone from entering a facility by striking, shoving, restraining, grabbing or other unwanted physical contact.
- Following and harassing a person within fifteen feet of a reproductive health care facility
- Engaging in conduct within fifteen feet of a facility in which the other person fears physical harm.
- Physically damaging a reproductive health care facility.

These are common sense measures that we can put in place to make sure that women who are seeking medical care from a reproductive health care facility can get the care they need without harassment or intimidation. This is something we should all be able to agree upon, and in fact the majority of Americans do agree that women seeking reproductive health care services should be able to do so. A poll released last year showed that 75% of Americans want women to be able to have access to reproductive healthcare in a supportive environment, and 68% agree that she should be able to access abortion care without shame¹.

¹ http://www.nirhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Memo-NIRH-Poll_Final_3.pdf



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Back home in Cleveland, right here in Columbus and other parts of Ohio, we repeatedly see examples of the kind of behavior outlawed by this bill. Clinic escorts report that protestors frequently block the driveway and parking lot of the clinic so that protestors can yell at the patient before she gets to the clinic. Imagine arriving at your doctor's office and being descended on by five or more people screaming at you that you are making the wrong decision. This is what happens almost weekly at clinics across the state.

Beyond intimidation and harassment, people in the name of protesting are becoming more aggressive and violent, as they have started blocking traffic, stolen the back and side fencing and broken 10 windows (\$2,500 each) at Preterm – a reproductive healthcare facility in my district. Our law enforcement officials are now having to help develop safety and security plans to provide protection for people going to reproductive healthcare facilities. Is this how we want our law enforcement officials to utilize their time when we are now in a State of Emergency in fighting the Opioid Epidemic?

No one should have to hear "I'm going to kill you" as they are entering a reproductive healthcare facility, whether they are a patient, staff member or visitor. Under no circumstance, should such a threat ever be acceptable and treated merely as common banter. However, without safeguards, such as HB 234, there is nothing stopping the protestors from threatening the lives of the clinic's patients. Regardless of political affiliation, we need to remember here, that with every threat of death or violence, people's lives are at a stake. We need the state of Ohio to recognize this.

HB 234 is a bill that is not about how you feel about the legality of abortion. This is about respecting people's rights to a constitutionally protected medical procedure without fear. This is about respecting the humanity of our fellow Ohioan. This is about being able to provide or receive medical care without harassment or intimidation. This is about doing everything we can to be proactive and prevent unthinkable violence and tragedy from happening to Ohioans.

Thank you, Chairman Manning and the committee for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

Committees:

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