

Opponent Testimony on House Bill 69
House Family and Community Advancement Committee
Marian Harris on behalf of the National Council of Jewish Women
Tuesday, March 10, 2015

Good morning, Chairman Derickson, Ranking Member Howse and Members of the House Family and Community Advancement Committee.

My name is Marian Harris and I am the former co-president of the National Council of Jewish Women, Columbus Section and current Advocacy chair. As an organization of 90,000 members across the country and 600 here in Columbus dedicated to the well-being of women, children and families, we strongly oppose House Bill 69 and urge the members of the Committee to focus its attention on the real need, the need for safe sex education, access to reproductive health care services, prescription equity and other means to reduce the need for abortion in our state. This is what the majority of women and families want and what our state really needs to reduce reliance on public assistance.

NCJW believes that a woman's right to reproductive choice is an essential component of a healthy community and fundamental to our right to religious freedom. We firmly believe in a woman's right to make personal decisions based on her own beliefs, a right that is protected by our Constitution. When one religious view is imposed upon us all we are denied our religious liberty. Sadly, that was and will be the result of your decision on bills before this General Assembly that seek to control women's reproductive health.

Our Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This declaration of religious liberty by the Constitutional Congress was designed to ensure that ancient patterns of oppression the kind that are happening in the Middle East right now, would not be repeated in America. Thomas Jefferson spoke of the wall of separation that must exist between church and state. Please do not dismantle this wall. Government is not a religious body and doctrine is not in its jurisdiction.

The First Amendment guarantees that government would not interfere in doctrinal disputes; no one group's religious dogma would be made law for everyone nor would anyone be forced to live by any particular doctrine. The power of government would not be used to force religious practice or doctrine upon anyone.

Judaism teaches that during a pregnancy, the life of the mother takes precedence over the potential life of a fetus. Every woman must have the personal freedom to apply the principles of her religion unfettered by some moral standard imposed by religious dogma and promulgated by legislators and lawmakers. It's collusion of church and state. We ask that whether we are Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim or atheist, we be free to follow the dictates of our own beliefs and our conscience.

We recognize that abortion is a complex issue – replete with moral, bio-ethical, philosophical and theological implications. What is clear is that the issue engenders strong feelings on all sides. Different religions have differing views on when life begins and even within religions, there can be varying opinions. We submit that this diversity of opinions is a question our nation has answered by upholding the key, founding principle of religious freedom. A central part of the US Supreme Courts 1973 decision on *Roe v. Wade* recognized that different moral and religious traditions have differing views on abortion.

We respect and recognize the right of religious groups whose beliefs differ from ours to follow the dictates of their faiths in this matter. But we ask no less for ourselves. We cannot allow a religious minority in this country to dictate decisions for the majority – 1 in 3 women in this country have had an abortion.

We are disheartened by the fact that while the current economic crisis has increased the number of those living in poverty, this General Assembly is choosing to ignore the dire need for comprehensive reproductive health services and instead is punishing the poor. Women and families need and have earned the right to comprehensive reproductive health coverage. Criminalizing abortion will not make abortions go away. They will retreat to the back alleys where they were prior to 1973, where women died as a result of illegal abortions. Sadly, as we all know from past experience, those with exceptional resources will be able to afford this choice while others will face devastating consequences.

No woman, no family comes to the decision to terminate a pregnancy lightly. As a member of the Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, NCJW members have answered an all-clergy counseling hotline where clergy across this state from denominations, ranging from Episcopal and Jewish to Lutheran, counsel those who are affected by the trauma and pain inherent in these decisions. The mother of a bipolar 15 year old who knows that her daughter is not equipped to deal with a pregnancy...a working mother raising her two children who would not be able to afford childcare for another child and would likely find herself unemployed and on welfare...the woman who left her abusive husband and has gone into hiding because he has come close to killing her on multiple occasions threatened to kill her, finds out she is pregnant with his child and must face the prospect of having an abuser be a part of her life...Please put yourself in their shoes.

Ohioans would be better served if our elected representatives focused on getting the economy back on track and stopped interfering with our right to religious freedom and the private lives of women and families.

Thank you.

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