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**Cincinnati, Ohio**

**Testimony to the State of Ohio Senate Committee on Government Oversight and Reform**

**October 21, 2015**

Thank you Chairman Coley, Vice-chair Seitz, ranking member Yuko, and distinguished members of the Government Oversight and Reform committee for the opportunity to testify on the issue before the committee. My name is Emily Joy. I am a life-long resident of Cincinnati and the great state of Ohio, and I am here today because these bills (HB 294 + SB214) endanger my career and the comprehensive education young people receive about healthy relationships, sexually transmitted infection (STI) and pregnancy prevention.

Before I speak about my role as a health educator, I would like to give you a context for the work that I do. I grew up in Norwood, Ohio and attended public schools for my entire educational career. From 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade I was subjected to state-mandated abstinence-only education. The few health classes that I had taught me the following things:

1. That I would bleed from my vagina and to use a pad or tampon to keep clean.
2. That if I had sex, then I would inevitably get pregnant AND get a really disgusting disease.  
And...
3. Since sex inevitably leads to pregnancy, I should carry an uncooked egg around school to remind me how difficult teen parenting can be, and thus should be abstinent.

My school, as many schools in Ohio, knew that I had a 163% chance of becoming pregnant before graduating. Which is probably why I was forced to attend school-wide abstinence assemblies featuring pop music and motivational speakers, who told us it was COOL to wait to have sex. Every year, we all had to sign a new pledge to remain a virgin until marriage, which meant that I would essentially die an abstinent spinster, because marriage equality didn't exist back then.

These classes and assemblies wasted government money because they completely failed us. They never addressed the spectrum of human sexuality, how to protect against STIs or pregnancy, and certainly never addressed the issue of dating violence or sexual assault. I was left with more questions than answers. As a victim of childhood molestation, how was I supposed to be a virgin when someone had already defiled my little body? How was I supposed to protect myself from the football players who threatened my sexual autonomy because I was gay? How was I supposed to know what a healthy relationship looked like, when my step-father was an abusive alcoholic and destroyed every ounce of self-worth that my mother had, beat my little brother with a belt, and then turned his anger on me?

It's because of these experiences, that I have dedicated my life to working for social change, reproductive rights, and violence prevention. This mission drove me to become a health educator with Planned Parenthood of Southwest Ohio. With this organization, I get to provide judgment-free, comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education to middle school and high school youth. I get to empower them with the knowledge they need to make healthy choices, and I get to see them

<sup>1</sup> "Estimated Teenage Pregnancy and Rates per 1,000 Females, By County and Age Group, Ohio 1997", <http://www.odh.ohio.gov/~media/ODH/ASSETS/Files/data%20statistics/health%20disparities/teenpreg97.pdf>

grow into respectful and responsible young adults because of the programs that we provide. If you take away grant funds from Planned Parenthood, we will not be able to continue this important work.

Lines 34 - 43 of H.B.294 and lines 42 - 51 of S.B.214, specifically seek to take away funding for the Rape Education and Awareness Development for Youth (READY) program that I provide under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grant. But the sponsors of this bill are not concerned with educating youth to prevent sexual violence. The language of the proposed bills makes it clear that the intention is to take away the ability of Planned Parenthood to provide educational programs of any sort. The clinical side of our organization performs safe and completely legal abortions as guaranteed by the decisions in *Roe v Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v Casey* (1992). Therefore, according to the language in this bill, I will not be able to teach youth how to have healthy relationships, or how to prevent sexual assault, simply because the medical side of my organization performs legal abortions. According to the language in this bill, I will not be able to teach youth how to protect themselves or others against bullying or intimate partner violence, because my organization discusses the option of having an abortion with women who have asked for options counseling. According to the language in this bill, the education department will not be able to collaborate with any other organization to put on violence prevention programs or events, else our mere collaboration might endanger their state funding as well. One of the greatest successes of VAWA is its emphasis on a coordinated community response to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking; but the language in this bill would explicitly prohibit any school or community-based organization from partnering with Planned Parenthood. The reach of this bill is much further than just cutting funding to abortion providers, you would be eliminating a vital community resource and keeping young people from truly protecting themselves against STIs, unplanned pregnancy, and sexual violence.

In Ohio, we believe that a pregnancy resulting from rape or incest is so dreadful that the state is willing cover the cost of a legal abortion. But under the language of this bill, discussing the option of abortion to girl or woman who has been raped, would constitute the promotion of abortion and would result in an organization losing funding. This bill corners women who are experiencing trauma, and forces them into decisions that may not be the best for them. This bill isn't just aimed at abortion providers, it's aimed at a woman's right to have options, a woman's right to decide what is best for her mind, body, and future.

As a requirement of the VAWA grant, we discuss power-based forms of violence. For those who are not aware, these forms of violence occur when someone in a position of power, be that age, gender, race, economic class, or position of authority use their power or status to coerce, assault, or violate a person's autonomy. It seems to me, that these bills are, in fact, flying against the values of the Violence Against Women Act, because people (mostly men) in positions of authority are using their power to coerce women into unhealthy situations, close women's health clinics, and silence women's voices about sexual health options.