

Testimony of Keleigh Cook
Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee
S.B. 23

Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid committee, my name is Keleigh Cook. I am a Columbus resident.

I write to you today to ask you not to let this bill out of committee. When I was twenty-two years old, a new boyfriend sabotaged the birth control we were using in order to purposefully impregnate me. I was in college and did not realize that I was pregnant until I was about 6-7 weeks. I remember walking in a blizzard to get to the store in order to confirm what I suspected. It took me several days to acquire an appointment to confirm with a doctor. When that happened, I knew instantly I was not able to be anyone's mother yet.

It took three more weeks from doctor confirmation to my appointment to obtain my abortion. I was a white woman living in a small city with transportation services, access to funding assistance, and it still was about a five week period from when I first realized I might be pregnant, to obtaining the procedure I needed in order to no longer be. If it was that easy for me and it still took that long, what about people who live in a small town far from the closest clinic? This bill is nothing more than an effort to limit access to healthcare, and scare doctors into not presenting options to their patients.

I moved to Ohio as an adult, with the hope of enjoying a place with opportunity for economic prosperity, and that I could enjoy with my family. I had visions of a small business, engaging with artists and creative types, while enjoying hiking and camping. I had a vision for a simple life. I have not found it here. I have found a region set on limiting equality and equity for pregnant people and mothers. I have sat in the rafters and watched a legislature so singularly minded on the issue of abortion, they have continued to ignore cries from constituents for support to make it easier to prevent the need for abortion in the first place.

I have listened to proponents of this bill cite the Constitution, but leave out one of the most basic tenants of our democracy: The separation of church and state. My religion is not the same as the proponents of this bill, and while their faith may determine their own actions in life, as yours may, Senators, this bill is nothing short of inflicting religious law upon your constituency. This bill does not make exception for rape or the lives of pregnant people who may be at risk. One proponent dismissed these occurrences as rare, and "not the fault of the innocent." How many lost lives are you willing to accept? Is this body of legislature ready to look my husband in the eye and say that my life and the lives of any future children I may have, were worth losing if a fetal anomaly pregnancy takes my life? What of the person with an ectopic pregnancy, will their life be worth losing? As a person who was sexualized at a very young age, assaulted by my own father, and later raped, I ask you what DO I get to decide about my own body if I live in Ohio? How far will this go? Pregnant people are not a binary body saints or sinners. We are complicated and diverse.

My story is what most proponents of this bill assume abortion looks like. A young, white, cis-gendered, able-bodied girl, caught up with a bad guy. It's easy to vilify me if I don't regret it, and easy to forgive if I do. But the truth is, the majority of people who obtain abortions are already parents. They are making decisions about the futures of their families, and some of those decisions are easy, and some are heartbreaking. The point is, none of those decisions are the business of anybody except the pregnant people and their physicians.

I listened to the proponent testimonies last week, and to the women who regret their abortions, I truly hope you can find peace. I'm glad that a safe and legal procedure was an option for you when you needed it, because even if you regret it, you didn't deserve to die over it. The girl in the bed next to me during my procedure did not want to have an abortion and was forced to be there by her mother. She didn't deserve that. No one deserves to have their bodily autonomy taken from them, not by strangers, not by loved ones, and not by government.

In closing, I remind you that you cannot grant personhood to something inside of me, and dependent upon my biology for development, without removing my agency and personhood. I am the dictator of this body. It belongs to me and no one else without my permission. You cannot stop abortion. It has been a part of life longer than any of us, our nation, or the book you draw your faith from. You can only try to stop access to safe and legal abortions. This bill is too extreme for Ohio. I urge you to vote no. Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions.