

Opponent Testimony for Senate Bill 23
Ohio Senate Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee
Submitted by: Becky Perkins
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Chair Burke, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Ohio Senate Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee:

I'm submitting this written testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 23, which if enacted, would prevent Ohio women from accessing safe and legal abortion – including women for whom carrying the pregnancy to term would force them to bear a child conceived from rape or incest.

As has been repeatedly stated by medical professionals, a fetal heartbeat is often detectable prior to the woman having knowledge of her own pregnancy. Contrary to assumption, the absence of a menstrual period does not always indicate pregnancy. Some women naturally have very long menstrual cycles, some have health conditions or take medications that delay or stop periods, and others have regular periods while pregnant. Women who have suffered psychological trauma – such as in the case of rape – may experience erratic cycles or lose track of the timing of their cycles altogether. Restricting access to a full range of healthcare options when a woman does not even have knowledge of her full medical condition is highly unethical and potentially dangerous.

In addition to my objection to S.B. 23 generally, as a professional who worked in victim advocacy for 15 years, I find it unconscionable that S.B. 23 makes no exception for rape or incest. This sends the message that the lives of women and girls who are raped or suffer incest are simply not worth as much as the fetuses they are forced to carry. It also sends the message that victims who wish to seek an abortion could be lying about their victimization. While some women who become pregnant as a result of rape choose to carry their pregnancies to term, the point is that it's *their choice* to do so. No woman or girl should be forced to bear her rapist's child against her will. Such a perversion of human decency is no better than the crime of rape itself. Imagine a girl molested and impregnated by her father being forced to bear that child: S.B. 23 would *require* it. Many victims of incest and domestic violence are forced to become pregnant as a means for their abusers to further control and manipulate them. Some abusers deliberately hide or destroy their victims' birth control. And children born into such circumstances often suffer at the hands of the abuser as well. If enacted, S.B. 23 would become another tool in the arsenal of rapists, human traffickers, and child molesters – an alarming fact that I would hope Ohio would not want to enable. Victims in Ohio deserve better. Women in Ohio deserve better.

I'm certain that the sponsors and co-sponsors of S.B. 23 would argue that women who face an unwanted pregnancy under any circumstances (including rape or incest) can simply put their babies up for adoption. But such a thing is far from simple. Aside from the legal, financial, and emotional complexities of the adoption process, being pregnant and giving birth is not merely a nine-month distraction during which a baby grows in utero and is then born. Pregnancy is a disruption of the woman's life and body. It renders women more vulnerable to violence (including murder), abuse, and

discrimination, it interrupts employment and academics, and it causes considerable sickness in many women. For many victims of rape and incest, pregnancy resulting from the crime is a further violation of body, mind, and spirit that is itself traumatizing. It is despicable to force women to endure additional trauma based on the perceived virtues of adoption. The unfortunate reality is that too many children – particularly minority children – are never actually adopted. This says nothing of the widespread and documented lack of resources and assistance that too many women who keep their babies (particularly minority and impoverished women) experience once their babies are born.

It has been demonstrated time and again that comprehensive sex education from an early age, and access to free or reduced-cost birth control, are the most effective means by which abortion rates are measurably reduced. Yet, sex education and access to contraception are routinely dismissed as intrusions on family values and parenting. These unfounded fears will not change the facts that women have sex, that too many women and girls are raped, and that sometimes they get pregnant when they don't want to. Instead of forcing women and girls to bear children by legislating away safe and legal abortion, it makes more sense to focus on facilitating access to accurate health information and preventative resources that would render abortion an option that is rarely sought or needed.

Women should have *all* safe options available to them when faced with *any* health issue, including pregnancy. No woman should ever be coerced, shamed, or outright forced into any course of action where her body and health are concerned. S.B. 23 is an unethical and dangerous bill for Ohio women and girls, and for the health care professionals who treat them.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.