



Secular Maryland

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SB 211 - FWA

Public Health - Giving Infants a Future Without Transmission (GIFT) Act

Dear Chair Pamela Beidle, Vice-Chair Katherine Klausmeier, and Members of the Finance Committee,

Health General §18–307(a) irresponsibly grants a religious belief exemption to pregnant women from being properly screened for syphilis. This provision is clearly unethical and should be revoked.

Congenital syphilis results through transplacental transmission of the bacteria to the fetus. The rate of infection during pregnancy in cases of untreated syphilis approaches 100%, resulting in a 40% fetal and infant death rate. Transmission is possible at any stage of pregnancy and can also result in serious injury short of death including multiple organ problems targeting the ears, eyes, liver, bone marrow, skin, bones, and heart. Health care providers in the United States and other countries are required to notify public health authorities whenever syphilis is diagnosed because the infection can spread via kissing and sexual activities.

Screenings and sonograms are legally required at the beginning of prenatal care in all states for identification of syphilis. Symptoms of syphilis may be very mild, or be similar to signs of other health problems. The only way to know for sure if someone has syphilis is to get tested. When a fetus contracts syphilis from its mother early treatment is essential in lowering the risks of miscarriage, stillbirth, after birth infant death, and the long-term effects of syphilis. The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) strongly recommends universal screening of all pregnant women, while the World Health Organization recommends all women be tested at their first antenatal visit and again in the third trimester.

Government has a *parens patriae* duty to protect our country's children. States relinquish their duty and leave infants vulnerable to death and disability when they

include religious exemptions in the law mandating syphilis testing during pregnancy.

Respectfully,
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