

Support
HB 705 - Declaration of Rights - Right to Reproductive Freedom
House Health & Government Operations Committee
February 21, 2023

Honorable Chair Peña-Melnyk:

My name is Layla Houshmand, and I am a resident of Montgomery County. I work in the medical device industry, and I have a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering. I'd like to share my experience with obtaining an abortion due to a medical emergency during a planned and wanted pregnancy in May 2021, before the *Dobbs* decision. **What my experience taught me is that even in Maryland, the right to reproductive freedom is not guaranteed, even in a life-threatening situation. For this reason and many more, I support HB 705 and urge for a favorable report.**

My husband and I were hoping to start a family in 2021. By May 11, I was 8 weeks pregnant after a miscarriage, and we were cautiously optimistic when we saw the first ultrasound that day. Like all new parents, we were excited but worried about my and the baby's health. I was already fighting intense nausea, fatigue, and what I thought was a migraine.

The following morning, I awoke to the most painful migraine of my life and severely distorted vision in my right eye, as though a layer of petroleum jelly covered my central view. Because of my background, I knew that one-sided vision problems meant I needed an eye exam, not a neurological assessment in the ER, and that time was critical. An optometrist friend found me an emergency ophthalmologist appointment immediately.

The appointment was brutal. I violently vomited 20 times in between imaging sequences. I lost consciousness briefly. The ophthalmologist told me that pregnancy caused a stroke in my optic nerve. She thought the vision loss was unlikely to worsen but might be permanent. I was stunned when she said, "There's nothing I can do for you because you're pregnant". My vision loss was caused by pregnancy, but I could not get any treatment or appropriate diagnostics *because* I was pregnant. My 8-week embryo was prioritized over me.

What if I was in more danger than the ophthalmologist thought? How could I recover any vision if I stayed pregnant and miserably sick? Still in the first trimester, I was acutely aware of the fact that there was no guarantee that the pregnancy would go to term. Forced to choose between my vision and my pregnancy, I chose my vision, and I said so repeatedly. She sent me home anyway and asked me to return in a week.

I needed my OB/GYN to help me coordinate an abortion, so I composed myself and called the urgent line. Despite my pleas, the medical assistant (not a licensed healthcare provider) who answered was reluctant to discuss abortion and refused to notify my OB/GYN of my condition. She did not tell me she was sorry for what I was going through. She did not offer to have my doctor call me. She would not recommend the names of any abortion clinics. She did not offer to call any clinics to get me an emergency appointment or coordinate one in an ER. On the most vulnerable and devastating day of my life, she felt empowered to make me feel like a criminal, to stand between me and healthcare.

I hung up and frantically searched for abortion clinics, knowing that an abortion in the ER was only an option if I was miscarrying. Desperate, I considered how to trigger a miscarriage myself if I could not find an appointment. Miraculously, a clinic scheduled me for the next morning; it would cost almost \$1,000, and there was substantial paperwork to complete, a challenging task in between vomiting and with one

functional eye. Before that appointment, the ophthalmologist called to ask me to go to the ER and request specific eye specialists. She hoped I wasn't having the abortion "because of the eye".

The healthcare providers at the abortion clinic were compassionate and determined that a procedural abortion would be safest in my precarious condition. They held my hands during the procedure and comforted me as I said goodbye.

It turned out that I was right: I *was* in more danger than the original ophthalmologist thought. I was later admitted to the hospital with a rare viral infection in the back of my eye, millimeters from my brain. The immunosuppression of pregnancy reactivated the [very common virus that causes cold sores](#) (HSV1). Left untreated, I risked complete blindness and death. A doctor at the hospital, trying to reassure me, said, "If you were still pregnant, I couldn't touch you." I was discharged legally blind in one eye and traumatized. For two months, I could not work. Since then, I have had five complex eye surgeries with the best surgeons in the world to try to restore some central vision, but it will never be the same. Neither will I.

And I am one of the lucky ones. I am medically literate, financially secure, work for a supportive employer, able to consult experts, and I live in a state without any mandatory abortion waiting periods. I am so fortunate that a clinic scheduled me within 24 hours – this would have been impossible for most Marylanders and most Americans. I needed an emergency abortion that same day, but without a doctor's support and coordination, I was on my own. And this happened before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. It would be much harder today.

Though my condition is rare, any [pregnancy carries significant health risks](#). Pregnancy itself is unsafe without an obligation to prioritize the patient over the fetus or without fast, easy abortion access. Everyone deserves the right to full bodily autonomy, to be safe in their own body. Everyone deserves to have full control over whether, when, and how they have a baby. Maryland must establish the fundamental right to reproductive freedom.

Thank you for your consideration. I urge for a favorable report of HB 705.

Sincerely,

Layla Houshmand, Ph.D.