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Testimony in Support of HB 615

Health Facilities - Confidentiality of Medical Records - Crisis Pregnancy Clinics

Good afternoon, Chair Bagnall, and honorable members of the Health Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to present **HB 615, Health Facilities – Confidentiality of Medical Records – Crisis Pregnancy Centers**. This bill assures us that as a state we continue to ensure that sensitive information for our residents, particularly related to their most personal decisions around pregnancy and reproduction, are kept confidential.

In 2023, Maryland codified the importance of safeguarding sensitive reproductive information and records by creating the definition of “legally protected healthcare” in the shielding bill. Additionally, in 2024, Maryland enacted the Online Data Privacy Act, which establishes heightened protections for consumer's health data -- including gender affirming care and sexual and reproductive health information -- that is not Protected Health Information subject to federal HIPAA standards.

This bill simply furthers what Maryland has already established as information that deserves protection and is not allowed to be shared (without explicit consent) by extending those protections to cover sensitive information gathered about a person by crisis pregnancy centers. These protections are particularly important now when reproductive rights are being litigated across the country.

People turn to crisis pregnancy centers at some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives, seeking honest information, compassionate support, and privacy. No one who reaches out for help should have their personal data exposed or exploited. Protecting their confidentiality is not optional; it is a basic matter of dignity and safety.

Crisis pregnancy centers often present themselves as providers of free, private services, but behind these assurances they target vulnerable pregnant people with misleading claims while collecting deeply personal information. Their visitors trust them—and that trust is being violated.

These centers offer private, free information and resources. However, their mission is to discourage a person from making the decision to have an abortion. Their information is slanted and sometimes misleading. They may present themselves as providing health care, even when there are no licensed practitioners on site. At the same time, they gather personal information about the person. It is imperative that we prevent their confidential information from being shared without their consent.

These facilities have received grants, sometimes with federal tax dollars, with limited or no accountability for the funds. We also have no way of knowing if the confidential information is being protected; it is possible that they share it across state lines where the person could face criminal charges. This bill seeks to maintain privacy and protect these individuals.

Because these centers are not healthcare providers, they are currently not subject to either the federal HIPAA privacy protection or our state privacy protections. While some crisis pregnancy centers claim on their websites that they are required by law to keep health information protected or certify that they are “HIPAA compliant,” the reality is that these centers are not protecting this information. Despite these claims on center websites, centers are widely sharing visitor data with their thousands of volunteers and, in at least one case, the public. Just one example of this is that a national network of crisis pregnancy centers put a training video on their website showing a sales team member demonstrating how to use the organization’s data collection software, and viewers could see the full names of thirteen women who visited one of the centers in New Iberia, Louisiana, along with information about their due date, last menstrual period, and whether they were given an ultrasound or pregnancy test. There is even a map visible that shows where each person lives.

Understanding the importance of this bill, we have met with several advocates and are working on technical amendments to ensure this bill is appropriately focused on the straightforward goal of ensuring that Marylanders’ confidential information is protected across organizations.

This committee, this legislature and the voters of this state have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to a person’s right to make all health care choices, including reproductive care choices. In the current political climate, we as policy makers must defend those rights. Shielding sensitive information is just one of ways we can do that, and HB 615 is the right vehicle to extend the protections we have already put in place.

Thank you for your consideration and I ask for a favorable report.