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Tuesday, February 2, 2021

Governor Gina Raimondo
Lieutenant Governor Daniel McKee
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Governor Raimondo and Lieutenant Governor McKee:

As an organization committed to ensuring all people can access reproductive health care, including abortion, we believe that each of us should be able to make decisions about pregnancy and parenting that respect our needs and our circumstances without political interference. However, policymakers have enacted bans on insurance coverage of abortion that push this decision out of reach for many, particularly those struggling to make ends meet.

This includes the state of Rhode Island, which currently has laws on the books that deny health coverage for abortion for people who use Medicaid and state employees. A similar law barring coverage in private insurance was removed as part of the *Reproductive Privacy Act*, but public servants and low-income families continue to have their benefits withheld when they need an abortion.

The Womxn Project was proud to be part of an effort to secure the passage and enactment of the RPA, which affirmed the right to abortion in our state. However, if we allow policies to remain in place that take away health benefits and make care unaffordable, then that right is taken away.

Our communities are still trying to survive a pandemic. Black, Indigenous and other people of color, low-income families and people with disabilities in our state have been especially hard hit. It is more important than ever that we do all we can to ensure each of us makes a living wage and everyone has access to the full-spectrum of health care, including abortion.

The ability to get an abortion should not be limited by the type of insurance you use. **We are asking you to show bold leadership and take a critical first step toward realizing this vision by eliminating abortion coverage restrictions from the Rhode Island state budget for Fiscal Year 2022.** This would not only ensure that our state budget reflects our shared values around health care access and reproductive rights, but studies have also shown that providing coverage for abortion can actually result in savings for insurance programs and increased financial stabilities in situations where people are not prepared to add to their families and are not forced to forego paying for things like rent or groceries because they are denied insurance coverage for an abortion.

Withholding coverage for abortion care creates profound hardships, particularly for those who already face significant barriers to receiving care. The pandemic exposed

the long-standing structural racism and inequities in our health systems. We know that same systemic racism and barriers to equal opportunity are at the core of abortion coverage bans like the federal Hyde amendment and state laws like the one in Rhode Island that deny coverage. These bans disproportionately impact the same communities as the pandemic.

Over the past 10 years, a robust movement rose up calling for the end of these obstacles to abortion care. In 2015, the first federal bill was introduced to end the Hyde Amendment and related abortion coverage restrictions. A similar bill, the Equality in Abortion Coverage Act (H 7618) was introduced in Rhode Island in 2020. Led by Rep. Liana Cassar and Sen. Bridget Valverde with strong and bipartisan co-sponsorship and championed by The Womxn Project in collaboration with a robust number of local, state and national partners.

A majority of voters agree that someone enrolled in Medicaid should have all of their pregnancy-related health care covered by their insurance. That includes abortion services. There is also strong support for proposals to make sure that private and public health insurance programs provide coverage for doulas. Research shows that ensuring access to birth workers improves health outcomes for birthing people and infants. It is also a strategic way to begin to address the maternal mortality crisis facing Black women.

A budget is a moral document. We stand in solidarity with advocates urging support for doula coverage, as well as asks to ensure access to affordable housing and increase the benefits for people using the Rhode Island Works program. We must do all we can to help the people who have been hurt most not only in this time, but by ongoing systemic racism and the cycle of poverty.

We urge you to listen to the needs of our communities and to make a clear and definitive statement that discriminatory abortion coverage bans have no place in the public policy of the state of Rhode Island by eliminating all such restrictions from the FY 2022 state budget. This will send a strong message of leadership that everyone should be able to decide when and how to start a family and that you are serious about closing gaps in access to the health care people need and the services to not only get by, but to thrive.

Sincerely,
Jocelyn Foye
Executive Director and Board President
The Womxn Project
(Written on behalf of the Board of Directors)

CC:

- Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott, Rhode Island Department of Health
- Marie L. Ganim, Health Insurance Commissioner
- Senator Dominick Ruggerio, Rhode Island Senate President
- Rep. Joseph Shekarchi, Speaker of the House