



Senator Carney, Representative Harnett and members of the Joint Standing Committee on the Judiciary, my name is Meredith Healey, I am a registered nurse and I serve as Director of Health Care delivery for Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, and I am here to submit testimony in support of LD 1899.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England provides comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care to more than 14,000 people in Maine at four health centers located in Biddeford, Portland, Sanford, and Topsham. People turn to us for affordable, high-quality care including wellness exams, birth control, disease testing and treatment, cancer screenings, abortion care as well as a variety of primary care services. We see everyone who comes to us regardless of ability to pay, and in a typical year, we provide more than \$4 million in free and discounted care to our communities in Maine.

As a mission driven health care provider, we fundamentally believe everyone should be able to get affordable, high quality sexual and reproductive health care in their communities, no matter where they live or how much money they make, and we advocate for policies that help make this vision a reality.

While we have experienced protest activity at all our locations in Maine (Biddeford, Portland, Sanford, and Topsham), my testimony will focus on our Portland health center, which is located on the second floor at 443 Congress Street in downtown Portland. Patients access our facility by the sidewalk and through the main entrance.

For ten years, a least once a week, every week, protesters gather on the sidewalks outside of our building, yelling, aggressively preaching, and directly engaging passersby. They target women and young people entering the building, who may or may not be coming to Planned Parenthood. This protest activity goes far beyond merely holding posters or handing out literature to those who request it. Protestors often obstruct access to the entrance and come in direct physical contact with those accessing the building. Just last week, a protestor aggressively bumped into a medical student as she entered the building causing her great distress and fear for her safety. Some protestors intentionally yell so loudly that it is heard in counseling and exam rooms, which is incredibly disruptive to our ability to provide healthcare, and a violation of state statute.

This situation was made worse during the COVID pandemic with patients and staff suffering increased harassment from protesters who did not socially distance or wear masks, even when state mandates were in effect. They hovered over patients as they tried to enter the facility including standing directly behind them as they buzzed for entry.

Our patients' healthcare can be significantly compromised by the protesters' activities. At times the interference from protestors yelling from the sidewalk can cause our patients increased anxiety and stress. This anxiety can cause patients to have elevated pulse and blood pressure, sometimes resulting in the need to increase amounts of medication to keep them comfortable. The disruptive protest activity is intended to and does directly impact the provision of care itself— because protesters yelling, shouting, aggressive preaching, can be heard in the exam rooms, patients can have difficulty focusing on critical information that is pertinent to their care including risks, benefits, alternatives to procedures, and post op information. For our patients who have experienced domestic abuse, sexual violence, or other traumatic events, the disruption from the protestors can evoke or trigger past traumatic experiences further compromising their wellbeing.

Under the current law, when care is disrupted by protest activities be it through the physical obstruction of the entrance or noise that interferes with our delivery of care, we call the police. They respond and either issue a warning or speak with the protestors responsible for the disruption. All too often, this same protestor will engage in the same behavior once the police leave or when they return the following week. For some protestors, the police have been contacted dozens of times for repeated violations. This process is taxing on staff, patients and directly impacts our provision of care. On other occasions, protestors will rotate in and out with one violating the law until a police response and then the other protestor will yell at the windows starting the cycle again. Over the course of time, this effectively allows a handful of protestors to disrupt care without any concern for consequences— directly undercutting the purpose and intent of the law.

Due to the impact on patient care we have instituted many interventions. We have a volunteer greeter program so that our patients have a friendly face on the street while walking the gauntlet of protestors. We have hired police officers to station themselves at the entrance. We have pursued other security measures to try and mitigate the experience for people entering the health center with limited success. We purchased white noise machines to reduce the interference from the yelling and we have even tried to use different parts of the health center in ways it was not designed for. All to decrease the impacts on our patients while they are receiving care.

LD 1899 would work to close gaps in the current law, improving patients' ability to access care without violating protestors first amendment rights. By creating a clearly defined 8-foot "medical safety zone" around the entrances to buildings in which patients receive health care, the bill gives patients and others using the buildings breathing room to access and exit the facilities while giving law enforcement a bright line to keep the peace and protecting protestors First Amendment rights.

Tightening the standard for noise disturbance violations to include any violation during business hours *at any time after being ordered to cease such disturbances by law enforcement* closes the door to the "rinse and repeat" exploitation of the law by a handful of protestors without imposing undue burdens on free speech. Making violations of the safety zone or intentionally

interfering or attempting to interfere with the exercise of certain constitutional rights a Class E crime adds actual consequences to aggressive and disruptive protest activities like those imposed by other trespassing laws. LD 1899 would bring Maine law in line with similar statutes in other states that have been ruled constitutional in the wake of the *McCullen decision*. No one should face fears of violence, harassment, intimidation, or threats when getting health care. Yet for more than a decade, protesters have harassed and intimidated PPNNE patients and staff in ways that have impacted patient care and threatened the health and safety of patients and staff. I urge you to vote "Ought to Pass" on LD 1899.