In the landmark case, Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court of the United States conceded that abortion is a fundamental right and all women deserve the right to a safe, legal abortion. The growing threat posed by the Trump-Pence Administration and the recent appointment of conservative judges to the U.S. Supreme Court threaten to take away this fundamental right. In response to these threats, Massachusetts Senator Harriette Chandler, with the support of many other MA Legislators and groups like Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts, has introduced the Roe Act. The Roe Act introduces several revisions to the existing abortion access laws that aim to “improve access to affordable abortion by removing unnecessary, burdensome provisions that delay and deny care”. These revisions replace outdated language, provide additional autonomy and protection to physicians performing these abortions under the law, legalize abortions beyond twenty-four weeks as deemed necessary by medical professionals, include fatal fetal anomalies as a medical reason for late-term abortions, require mothers to sign informed consent forms, eliminate the requirement for minors to acquire parental consent or consent from a judge to receive an abortion, protect confidentiality between the physician and the patient, include abortion under reproductive healthcare coverage, and establish safety net coverage for uninsured women to receive a safe and legal abortion.

The Bill

S.1209/H.3320: An Act to remove obstacles and expand abortion access

Elevator Speech

Thank you for meeting with us today. Our names are Aryela Vanetsky and Sarah McDonald and we are here today because we can all agree that justice and human rights are a crucial part of our fundamental values as American citizens, and people. As two college women living in our current political climate we are fearful that these basic rights are being threatened and without the preservation of the Roe Act, we are in danger of compromising women’s livelihoods, health and overall well-being. Our current political leaders pose a grave
danger to female reproductive rights, and have made it clear they intend to overturn Roe v. Wade. In order to protect the citizens of Massachusetts from the attack of the white house. We cannot rely on the federal government to protect the rights of women and we must strengthen and expand women’s healthcare access to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our communities. The Roe Act (S.1209/H.3320) serves as a protective mechanism to allow for low income and underage women to access comprehensive reproductive care services. The Roe Act will provide comprehensive services to these communities regardless of financial status or age, and would no longer require underage women to get legal consent from a parent or judge. We urge you to hold a hearing on this legislation and continue protecting women like ourselves from ever having to wonder “what if”.

- Excerpts from Storybook

“Trump entered office with a pretty anti-choice agenda and his supreme court choices have made it clear what they intend to do. It’s extremely likely that Roe v. Wade is going to be gutted to the point to where it loses all significance.” – Kate Froehlich, Membership and Organizing Manager, MA NARAL

“This isn’t just a women’s rights issue. This is a people’s rights issue.” – Kara Schamell, Licensed midwife and women’s rights advocate

“Even though abortions are legal they don’t feel legal because accessing them is so difficult.” – Kara Schamell, Licensed midwife and women’s rights advocate

“Underrepresented groups have the hardest time accessing abortions. Minors often have a hard time telling their parents or guardians and may people don’t have access to vehicles. Through the abortion support collective I have worked with people who are from wine and Rhode Island and Connecticut, all over the northeast, where they lack abortion clinics, that have been forced to come to Boston for abortions. The biggest barrier we see is with day-of logistical support and money. We have to be prepared on all fronts, including on the state level. We need these written processions. We need the Roe Act.” – Emma O’Brien, A birth doula, member in the Boston Abortion Support Collective

- Op-Ed

Sarah

Pro-lifers: Where Ignorance is Strength and Fear is Power

Orwell said it best. “War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength.” A novel about the dangers of an overly powerful government in which thought is not free and ignorance is cherished. 1984 has proven to be a tool utilized by both sides of our increasingly bipartisan government. A tool that the pro-life coalition has utilized in an effort to sway the masses to fight against the Roe Act, a bill aiming to expand abortion access and protect the Commonwealth from the likely overturning of Roe v. Wade.

The pro-life movement, in particular, has decided to capitalize on these fears as a means to support their cause, calling the new language in the recently introduced bill S. 1209, commonly known as The Roe Act, “Abortion Speech”. The arguments made by the pro-life community are often laughed off and seen as ignorant attempts to sway a population lacking education on the bill, whereas pro-choice supporters attempt to educate and inform. However, where the pro-choice coalition seems to be failing is their insistence on honesty. The pro-lifers are onto something – ignorance is strength and fear mongering seems to be the way to go. Infamous serial killer, Charles Manson, said so himself: fear is power.

Abortion is currently defined as “the knowing destruction of the life of an unborn child” and pregnancy as “the condition of a mother carrying an unborn child”. The Roe Act aims to replace archaic language surrounding abortion laws in Massachusetts and expand access for women seeking these services, defining abortion as “any medical treatment needed to induce the termination of a clinical, diagnosable pregnancy” and pregnancy as “the presence of an implanted human embryo or fetus within a person’s uterus”. According to the Catholic Church and other pro-life supporters, this change in language is representative of “abortion-speech” and likens this to the Orwellian dystopia described in 1984. This change in speech is, apparently, a tool for the evil and manipulative pro-choice supporters to trick the unknowing public into accepting abortion. Subsequently, we should all be scared of the pro-choice manipulation tactics as we enter the dystopian era of thought police.

As ridiculous as this sounds, the pro-life movement deserves some credit – and I’m happy to give it where it’s due. Comparing the changing definition of abortion to something more scientific to 1984 is a smart move. A very smart move, in fact. Fear seems to be key in our current political climate. Don’t hate the player, hate the game.

Sarcasm aside, finding a way to combat the false information relayed by the pro-life community is a pressing issue. How do we compete with lies and fear? Truthfully, I’m not so sure. Should we stoop to a level synonymous with the fear perpetuated by our adversaries?

Absolutely not. Our greatest strength is honesty and truth. The Roe Act introduces several revisions to the existing abortion access laws that aim to “improve access to affordable abortion by removing unnecessary, burdensome provisions
that delay and deny care”. These revisions replace outdated language, provide additional autonomy and protection to physicians performing these abortions under the law, legalize abortions beyond twenty-four weeks as deemed necessary by medical professionals, include fatal fetal anomalies as a medical reason for late-term abortions, require mothers to sign informed consent forms, eliminate the requirement for minors to acquire parental consent or consent from a judge to receive an abortion, protect confidentiality between the physician and the patient, include abortion under reproductive healthcare coverage, and establish safety net coverage for uninsured women to receive a safe and legal abortion. The ability to be an autonomous human being is an inherent and constitutional right in the United States, a right that the Commonwealth needs to protect. We can only hope the facts are enough to sway the public, and that, through widespread education of our bill and our message, we can gain support for a cause so necessary to our freedom and our body’s. Support the Roe Act through educating your peers, through hard facts and honesty, through contacting your senator and urging them to support the bill. And hopefully, the truth will prevail.

Ary

How does it feel?

The morning after makes you feel insecure and fearful of what you should do next. You are filled with embarrassment and question how to go about the rest of your day. Unfortunately for you, there are two options and the latter is surrounded with guilt. There’s no way to escape it, you finally decide it is time for you to face your fear. The journey to the bathroom fills you with anxiety, your stomach knots, and you can’t decide whether your sickness is attributed to morning sickness everyone always talks about, or your mental sickness. After 10 minutes of waiting, a plus sign appears to be looking up at you indicating you have a huge decision to make. You don’t know whether to break down and cry, or burst from happiness. Questions and concerns fill your head with doubt.

Where do we go from here?

Not only are you not in a financially stable place, but you’re already struggling in school and you do not know how to even begin providing for another life, much less your own. That night was the night that changed everything for you, and you can only think about the quality of life you and your unborn child would have at sixteen years of age. You have been raised to think that sex is unholy, you have been taught that pregnancy is shameful, and you do not know what your options are as a young girl raised in an out-of-sight-out-of-mind household.

The reality is, this scenario is not uncommon or unlikely for many sixteen year-old women, nor is it uncommon for any woman of any age or walk of life. It is true that most do not have the financial stability to support themselves or a child, however the conversation about abortion goes beyond that. In some instances, women arrived at this scenario as a result of sexual assault and rape. Too often we are quick to look at the word “abortion” and jump to ominous conclusions about what it means and how women feel or don’t feel about the life of the fetus growing inside them, but it couldn’t be farther from the truth.

In 2016, roughly 2,000 adolescent women between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years old were giving birth and of that, the abortion rate was approximately 9%. Although these statistics do not appear to shock us at first, it is concerning that we as a state have not allowed women adequate access to reproductive health care services, and we force members of our commonwealth to look beyond the scope of abortion being an optioning fear of embarrassment and ridicule to look for other alternatives. Additionally we know that “Massachusetts has one of the most restrictive parental consent laws in New England” making our scenario almost impossible to avoid without parents getting involved somehow. Not only have young women attested to “mandatory parental consent interfering” with patients relationships with health care professionals, but it keeps the healthcare provider from “deciding what is best” for the patient. This is the best case should the young girl even be within radius of a woman’s healthcare clinic. In many instances, women are forced to travel for miles out of state just to consult with a healthcare professional about their options.

We are ignoring women’s rights and interfering with their livelihoods. This is not a political issue, it is a personal issue that bridges the gap between justice and equality. The Roe act serves and a mechanism to allow for women of all ages to access the necessary health coverage needed to sustain a healthy and happy life. If we continue to ignore how our current political climate is posing a huge threat to women across the country and the globe, we are not doing our job as citizens to protect people under the constitution. Ultimately everyone benefits from a woman’s right to choose what is best for her and her unborn child. The Act serves to “keep people safe, respect and support the private medical decisions of all people” and in order for us to continue building a sustainable and healthy commonwealth.

If you are someone that wants to continue to foster healthcare services and access to adequate healthcare for every gender and race, take it upon yourself to support the Roe Act. A plus doesn’t always indicate just a sign on a pregnancy test. It could be a huge step forward for everyone in our state.

House Ways & Means Script:
273,539 children entered the foster care system in 2016. Over
687,000 children spent time in foster care. According to the NCA (National Council for Adoption), it costs approximately $25,000/year for each child in foster care. A modest estimate of the annual cost is over $15 billion. While 55% of babies under one year old are adopted through foster care, most children enter the system at the age of seven. The likelihood of adoption decreases with age, resulting in many children spending their entire adolescent lives in the foster care system. A child entering foster care at the age of seven and remaining there until legal adulthood, 18, costs approximately $275,000.

What does any of this information have to do with abortion access? An early term abortion procedure or pill can cost a woman anywhere between $50-$900, the average price being between $300 and $600. Several private health insurances cover first trimester abortions completely. However, without insurance these costs are typically required up front and in full. 75% of abortion patients identifying as poor or low income, approximately 60% of abortions are obtained by women in their twenties, 59% of abortions are obtained by women with children. And 49% of abortion patients live below the federal poverty level. While Massachusetts has historically been a leader in decreasing poverty and expanding health care access, 10.5% of citizens still reside under the poverty line and 5.3% of citizens lack health insurance.

The Roe Act aims to expand abortion access to low income communities, both with and without health insurance, through widespread MassHealth and safety net coverage. While MassHealth typically covers abortions, two major programs: MassHealth Limited and MassHealth Prenatal do not have abortion coverage. Additionally, undocumented individuals residing in Massachusetts cannot be covered under MassHealth, their only options being out-of-pocket pay or safety-net coverage. That being said, safety net coverage is not currently available in Massachusetts for abortions. The expansion of abortion coverage through the Roe Act under all MassHealth programs and safety net coverage would provide a large population with abortion access. Since the majority of women seeking abortions are poor/low income, this coverage has the ability to be life changing, and fiscally opportune. As discussed earlier, one child living in foster care from the age of 7 to 18 (11 years) costs upwards of $275,000, while an early term abortion process costs less than $900 on average. Several women are forced to give birth to unwanted children. Many children go into foster care because their parents are unwilling or unable to care for them. Expanding abortion access and coverage saves the mother and the child from this pain and tumultuous livelihood and the government from spending millions.

The legalization and coverage of late-term abortions is likely to be a primary argument against the Roe Act, late term abortions often costing anywhere between $17,000 and $50,000.

However, fewer than 1.3% of abortions take place after 21 weeks. With such a small population seeking late term abortions, cost is expected to be minimal. We hope you take everything we have presented you into consideration and we urge you to please keep this information in mind as you vote this bill out of the Ways & Means Committee. The Roe Act presents the opportunity to expand and protect constitutional rights for women and decrease overall spending in the long-term for the state.

Letter to the Legislator

Dear Senator:

My name is Sarah McDonald and I am a student at Brandeis University. As a women who resides in your district, I want to express my support on behalf of S.1209 and why I feel it is incredibly important for our state to continue pushing this legislation forward. Justice, human rights, and autonomy are crucial parts of our fundamental values as American citizens, and as people. As a woman living in our current political climate, I am fearful that resources related to women’s health, particularly regarding abortion access, are being threatened. I feel that it is my right as a woman and as an autonomous human being to do with my body what I choose and it is imperative these values are protected.

The Roe Act will ensure that all women have access to proper reproductive care, including low income women and minors. It will also continue to uphold the strength of current healthcare resources and services that are available to Massachusetts residents. Being a college student that has been faced with many unpredictable situations has made me consider why having this protective legislation is crucial to my livelihood and well-being. If and when Roe v. Wade is overturned, this inherent human right, my right as a citizen of the United States and resident of Massachusetts, could be jeopardized. My fear is that women would be forced to take dangerous measures to maintain control of their own bodies. The Roe Act will be the protective mechanism necessary to protect women like myself and women all over the Commonwealth from the current presidential administration’s unapologetic disregard for female reproductive rights. I urge you to pledge your support to this bill and urge your fellow senate and house members to hold a hearing for this legislation. Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sarah McDonald and Ary Vanetsky
Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Sarah

On Meeting Senator Chandler

Ary and I met Senator Chandler during our first State House visit. Truthfully, this was the interview I was most nervous about, given her status in the MA legislature and lengthy and successful career. She was running a bit late, so we were the last group to start our interview. I think both Ary and I were a bit nervous in the beginning, so the interview started off a little rocky. However, as the interview continued we both became more comfortable and had an amazing conversation with the Senator, discussing the Roe Act and several different reproductive and educational issues. This interview differed from others we had. In my opinion, we developed a more personal relationship, discussing our home lives and states of origin in depth. After our conversation, Senator Chandler offered us both internships at the State House for the summer. I was shocked and elated to receive this offer, especially from such an established woman of the state senate. Overall, our interview went very well. Most importantly, I think I learned how important it is to come prepared and educated on the topic of discussion. I felt a little unprepared, as it was early in the semester and I didn’t know quite as much about the Roe Act. Coming prepared with questions increases my confidence and ability to act professionally.

Ary

On Meeting with Senator Comerford

Our meeting with Senator Comerford took place outside of one of the senate rooms in the state house. Senator Comerford was very excited to hear about our opinions and thoughts on the Roe act. Her insights were very knowledgeable, and she had a lot of things to say about the support she has of the bill. The importance she felt was necessary to express on behalf of the success of the Roe act. Sarah and I were both very lucky to have had the opportunity to speak with her as she was very insightful. Her personal experience in the Senate has led her to be particularly passionate about women’s rights and legislation surrounding this. In addition, she was very helpful to us in providing us with video footage, and offering ways in which students like us can begin to reach out to their local government agencies and advocate on behalf of the bill. Her experience in the public health office has also given her the ability to work next to Senator Harriette Chandler, which she mentioned was one of the most eye-opening and motivating experiences for her thus far during her time in the Massachusetts state house.

Update

Update as of 7/12: A Joint Hearing was held for the bill on June 17th. The hearing, as reported by WBUR, was an “emotionally charged debate” with droves of supporters and protesters in attendance. There has been no action reported since the hearing.

For more information

View the bill (MA legislature website):
S.1209: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/S1209
H.3320: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H3320

Organization or Coalition support: