

May 9, 2017

The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senate
506 Senate Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Shaheen:

As organizations committed to protecting and improving women's health and rights, we write in support of the Access to Contraception for Women Servicemembers and Dependents Act of 2017, S. 957. This bill ensures that all servicemembers and their dependents who rely on the military for health care have access to contraceptive coverage without co-pay, as well as emergency contraception and comprehensive family planning counseling.

Women play a critical role in the U.S. military and currently constitute just over 15 percent of all active duty military members, with more than 200,000 women serving on active duty in the Armed Forces or in the Selected Reserve. More than 95 percent of women serving in the military are of reproductive age. An additional 1.1 million female spouses and dependents of active duty military personnel who rely on the military for health coverage are of reproductive age.

Meeting the reproductive health care needs of servicemembers is critical to ensuring military readiness and mission accomplishment. Recent studies have shown that women in the military have a rate of unplanned pregnancy that is higher than the general population. Unintended pregnancies interfere with servicewomen's ability to complete their missions, since pregnant women cannot deploy and must be evacuated from war zones. Studies have also shown that servicewomen face unique challenges accessing contraception and family planning counseling, especially when deployed. Access to contraception for servicewomen, as well as non-active duty women, spouses, and dependents, means that they will have access to contraceptive care and counseling that will help them treat a variety of reproductive health conditions and avoid unintended pregnancy.

While active duty military women have no cost-sharing for any prescriptions, non-active duty military women and female dependents must pay cost-sharing for birth control acquired outside of a Military Treatment Facility (MTF). Costs can be prohibitive to accessing contraception, particularly for highly-effective longer-acting methods, which can have high up-front costs. The Access to Contraception for Women Servicemembers and Dependents Act of 2017 would eliminate this cost barrier by removing cost-sharing for all Food and Drug Administration

(FDA)-approved methods of contraception and contraception care (including insertion, removal, and follow up), sterilization procedures, and education and family planning counseling. By doing so, the bill would help to ensure that women eligible for Department of Defense (DOD)-based health insurance have the same birth control coverage as federal employees and those who rely on private insurance coverage.

The Access to Contraception for Women Servicemembers and Dependents Act of 2017 also requires TRICARE to offer insurance coverage of all FDA-approved methods of contraception without cost-sharing. TRICARE covered approximately 1.4 million women of reproductive age in 2015, including female dependents of active duty military personnel.

The bill also promotes better access to emergency contraception (EC) for servicewomen, which is a method of contraception that prevents pregnancy if taken within a specified window of time after unprotected sex, birth control failure, or sexual assault. Timely access to EC is particularly important for servicewomen on active duty, who report rates of unwanted sexual contact at approximately 16 times higher than those of the comparable general population of women in the United States. DOD regulations already require that health care providers at MTFs provide survivors of sexual assault with information about EC. The Access to Contraception for Women Servicemembers and Dependents Act of 2017 ensures that this requirement is included in the statute, and also requires MTFs to offer EC to a sexual assault survivor upon her request.

The Access to Contraception for Women Servicemembers and Dependents Act of 2017 also improves upon servicewomen's access to comprehensive family planning counseling. Research shows that lack of comprehensive family planning counseling has contributed to a higher rate of unintended pregnancies among servicewomen than the civilian population. The DOD already requires that health care providers follow established clinical practice guidelines on standards of care with respect to methods of contraception and counseling on these methods, as well as ensuring that women members of the Armed Forces have access to comprehensive counseling on the full range of contraceptive methods. The bill builds on these requirements by establishing a uniform standard curriculum to be used in education programs on family planning for *all members* of the Armed Forces. This includes not only information on the full range of contraceptive methods, but also information about the prevention of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the positive impact family planning can have on health and readiness of the Armed Forces, the right to confidentiality, and other medically-accurate information that will help all servicemembers make informed decisions.

We believe servicemembers and dependents who receive health coverage through the military deserve the highest quality health care to address their reproductive health care needs, therefore, we strongly support the Access to Contraception for Women Servicemembers and Dependents Act of 2017.

Thank you,

American Academy of Nursing
American Association of University Women (AAUW)

American Civil Liberties Union
American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)
American Society for Reproductive Medicine
Black Women's Health Imperative
Center for Reproductive Rights
Consumer Health First
Feminist Majority Foundation
Ibis Reproductive Health
Institute for Science and Human Values
NARAL Pro-Choice America
National Abortion Federation (NAF)
National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF)
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Council of Jewish Women
National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association
National Health Law Program
National Institute for Reproductive Health
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
National Network of Abortion Funds
National Organization for Women
National Partnership for Women and Families
National Women's Health Network
National Women's Law Center
People for the American Way
Physicians for Reproductive Health
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Population Connection Action Fund
Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need
Service Women's Action Network
The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy
Union for Reform Judaism