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ACLU OF RI POSITION: OPPOSE

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO 25-S 305, RELATING TO HEALTH AND SAFETY – MEDICAL ETHICS DEFENSE ACT May 20, 2025

The ACLU of RI strongly opposes passage of the bill entitled “Medical Ethics Defense Act” being considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee today. The proposed legislation is so sweeping in the scope of what it purports to “protect” and who it purports to “protect” as to excuse and immunize virtually all medical professionals, licensed or in training, support staff, and institutions from providing basic and necessary medical care, including emergency and life-saving treatment.

Rhode Island already provides a protection to physicians and medical staff personnel who object to participating in an abortion or sterilization procedure on moral or religious grounds under R.I.G.L. §23-17-11.

This proposed legislation is far more sweeping in scope and coverage. It would extend to any person or entity who or which purports to assert an objection based upon any opposition that the person or entity unilaterally declares to be their “ethical, moral, or religious belief or principles.” There are no limits on the definition. It could easily support an objection to provide care by a white supremacist (who believes that the races must remain separate on moral grounds), or by a person who opposes, on religious grounds, providing any treatment of any sort to a sex worker because she is viewed as morally corrupt, or to a “sinful” man because his marital partner is also a man —regardless of the nature of the medical or emergency care at issue.

In addition, “discrimination” as detailed in the proposed legislation is designed to protect solely the objecting person or institution and provides no protection from discrimination to the person seeking or in grave need of medical or emergency care. Instead, the medical worker or institution is protected from civil or criminal liability, no matter how egregious their alleged “principle” or how harmful its impact on the patient.

There is also no limit to the type of “medical procedure or service” which the objector could decline to provide. A physician or other medical professional in training must be treated as fully satisfying all training requirements and licenses even where they object, on conscience grounds, to participating in or receiving various types of necessary training. A hospital receptionist could refuse to admit a person who needs emergency care because of a “conscience objection” to the individual or the nature of their medical condition, and not be required to take any steps to ensure that non-objecting personnel be contacted and involved. An RN could refuse to administer any immunization shots of any kind regardless of circumstances if they have a “principled” objection to vaccinations. A physician declining to provide care, including emergency care, would have no obligation to find a substitute to provide medical assistance that they are confronted with but oppose on matters of conscience. The list is endless.

The proposed legislation, it is submitted, is designed to, and will completely, upend the provision of medical care in Rhode Island. It should be rejected.

Submitted by:
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