

South Carolina lawmakers consider bill to require women to see ultrasounds before abortion

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COLUMBIA, S.C. – Women seeking abortions in South Carolina would be required to view an ultrasound image of their fetus before the procedure under a proposal gaining support from lawmakers. If enacted, it would be the first law of its kind in the nation.

Some states make ultrasound images available to women before an abortion, but South Carolina would be alone in mandating that women see the pictures.

Proponents say women would change their minds after seeing an ultrasound and choose instead to keep the child or offer it for adoption.

To reduce abortions, women need “as much background as possible when they're making decisions,” said Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council, the state affiliate of Focus on the Family.

Critics consider the proposal a tool to intimidate women who already have made an agonizing decision.

“The women of South Carolina would rather talk to their doctor about information they need to make private, personal medical decisions. This is not a place for interference by politicians,” said Nancy Keenan, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America.

The bill's chief sponsor, Rep. Greg Delleney, considers the bill a natural addition to the state's informed-consent law, which requires that women be told about fetal development and offered alternatives to abortion. The law requires a woman to have at least an hour to think about the information before ending her pregnancy.

Marie Connelly of Columbia, who had an abortion more than four years ago, said she now wishes she could have seen an ultrasound of her fetus before undergoing the procedure. She said she recently went back to the clinic to get “the only picture I will have of my child.”

“This legislation will serve as one last chance for those women who, like myself, unknowingly choose against their better judgment,” said Connelly, a director at the family council. “More women will not have to bear the relentless heartache knowing they will never be able to hug their lost child.”

Similar legislation has arisen across the nation over the last few years as states try to strengthen abortion-counseling requirements, said Elizabeth Nash, a public policy associate at the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit research center on sexual and reproductive health.

At least seven states have laws concerning abortions and ultrasounds. For example, women in Oklahoma, Utah and Wisconsin must be told an ultrasound is available. In Arkansas and Michigan, if an ultrasound is performed, women must be given the opportunity to view it.

Ten other states are considering similar legislation. Mississippi is reviewing a proposal that would allow women to listen to a fetal heartbeat in addition to seeing the ultrasound image.

Delleney's proposal would require patients to certify in writing that they viewed the ultrasound.

Democratic state Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter plans to lead the fight against the legislation when it comes up for debate later

this month in the GOP-dominated House. But she said she expects the legislation to pass because even lawmakers who don't like the bill will be afraid to vote against it.

The measure has picked up 20 co-sponsors in the House. A matching bill in the Senate remains in a committee.

Lindsay Siler, a spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood Health Systems in Raleigh, N.C., said if legislators want to reduce abortions, they should focus on preventing unintended pregnancies.

“Women are intelligent and thoughtful human beings who would not go forward if they did not think this was in their best interest,” Siler said. “This bill is nothing more than politically driven. It's unnecessary and an attempt to restrict abortion by scaring and intimidating women.”