

METRO, NEWS

R.I. lawmakers reintroduce law to protect abortion rights

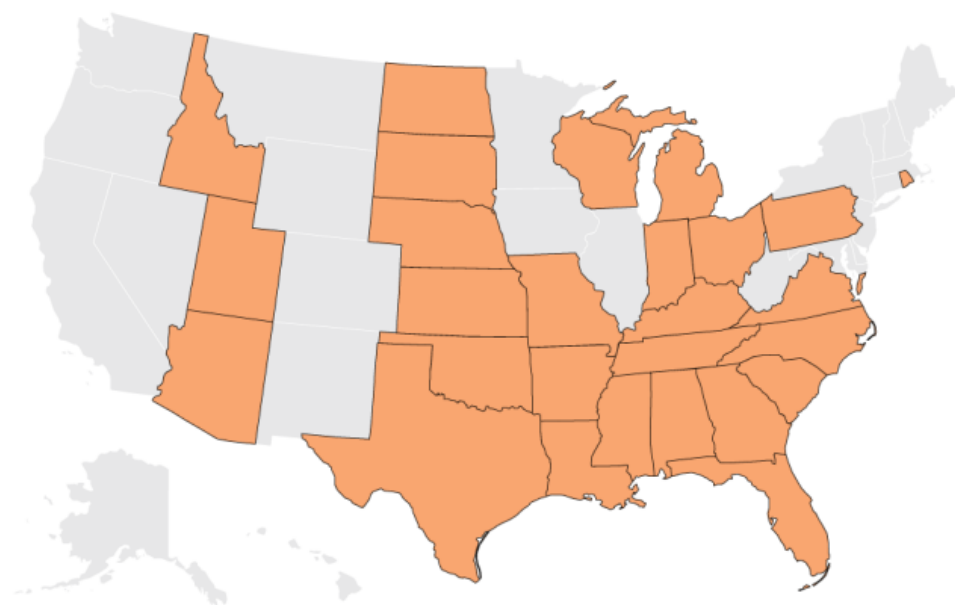
Proposed bill, identical to one rejected last year, faces stiff opposition in House from Republicans

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Wednesday, February 15, 2017

States receiving an F on reproductive rights



Source: NARAL Pro-Choice America

HERALD FILE

Fearing an overturn of the 1973 landmark Supreme Court ruling *Roe v. Wade* by a Supreme Court slated to lean conservative, Rhode Island lawmakers have reintroduced the Reproductive Health Care Act to protect the right to have an abortion in the state. The bill is identical to legislation introduced last year, said Rep. Edith Ajello D-Providence, who reintroduced the act to the R.I. House of Representatives Feb. 3.

The previous bill was introduced to the House Judiciary on Feb. 3, 2016 and was ultimately unsuccessful. Similar to its predecessor, the bill aims to “prohibit the state from interfering with a woman’s decision to prevent, commence, continue or terminate a pregnancy prior to fetal viability,” according to the legislation. The bill also prohibits any restrictions on the use of medically recognized methods of contraception and abortion.

The bill is co-sponsored by 33 of the 75 members of the Rhode Island House of Representatives, but no Republicans were willing to sign on as co-sponsors of the bill, Ajello said. Though the bill failed to pass last year, Ajello voiced her optimism of its passing this time around given the increase of pro-choice members in the R.I. House.

“There are six new members of the House who replaced anti-choice representatives, which substantially increases the number of pro-choice members,” Ajello said.

Monday marked a year since the death of Justice Antonin Scalia. With Scalia’s vacancy and the Republican blockade of Merrick Garland’s nomination, the U.S. Supreme Court is currently divided between four conservative and four liberal justices.

President Trump nominated Neil Gorsuch last week, potentially tipping the court in favor of conservatism. At a Green Bay, Wis. town hall meeting Mar. 30, 2016, Trump also added to pro-choice advocates’ fears, saying the government should somehow punish women who have abortions, but he later **walked back** on that comment. With Gorsuch’s nomination and the resulting uncertainty of the court’s ideological makeup, reproductive rights in Rhode Island are threatened, Ajello said.

If Roe v. Wade is overturned, some R.I. laws nulled by the Supreme Court decision could come back into play, Ajello said, including a law requires spousal notification prior to abortion.

“A woman has to inform her husband, and the doctor needs to have proof that the husband is aware that the abortion is to take place,” Ajello said.

Laws like this aren’t all that’s restricting access to abortion. Because of poor access to abortion clinics and women’s health resources, Rhode Island was awarded an F in reproductive freedom by NARAL Pro-Choice America — a national reproductive rights advocacy **group**.

Gopika **Krishna** ’13 MD’17, a board member of Medical Students for Choice, said that students and community members should get involved in coalitions and organizations to protect reproductive rights — particularly for those most vulnerable in light of a possible overturn.

Under current Rhode Island constitutional law, the right to have an abortion would not be guaranteed in the event Roe v. Wade is overturned. **Krishna** said, adding that women would have to travel to states like New York or Vermont in order to have access to such procedures like abortion. Those with limited financial means and time would be the most at risk, she added.

“Our laws are ambiguous on the subject — we want to make sure that we’re in a place where we don’t have to be concerned that people will lose access to reproductive health care and abortion,” said Craig O’Connor, R.I. Director of Public Policy and Government Relations with Planned Parenthood of Southern New England.

Though O’Connor does not anticipate an overturn of the Supreme Court ruling, he voiced his strong support of the Reproductive Health Act and continues to work with lawmakers like Ajello to protect reproductive rights.

“At this point, overturning Roe v. Wade is a distant possibility; it’s not out of the realm of the unthinkable, but we want to make it clear a keep things the way they are currently under Roe v. Wade,” O’Connor said.

O’Connor said he expects Ajello’s bill to be introduced to the Senate in the coming days.

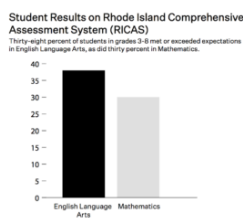
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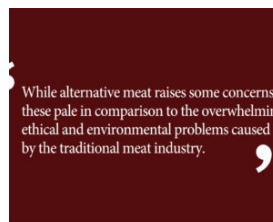
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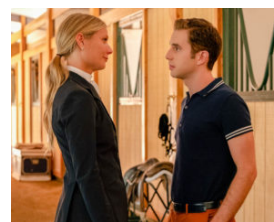
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