
BILL NO: House Bill 1167
TITLE: Public Health - Abortions - Coercion (Coercive Abuse Against Mothers Prevention Act)
COMMITTEE: Health and Government Operations
HEARING DATE: March 11, 2022
POSITION: **OPPOSE**

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a statewide, non-profit legal service organization that provides direct legal representation to survivors of domestic violence and advocates legislatively on issues related to the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Part of that advocacy includes supporting women in their reproductive choices so that they are able to build their families how and when they want, and ensuring that women's reproductive health care is treated equitably and fairly as a medical issue and not a political one. We strongly oppose House Bill 1167, as it is clearly forwarding a political viewpoint ostensibly through a lens of caring for women facing coercive behaviors but disregarding other more common forms of reproductive coercion.

The Women's Law Center (WLC) assists hundreds of victims of intimate partner violence every year. Sometimes reproductive coercion is a part of the dynamic of power and control being exercised over our clients. However, unlike what is being addressed in HB 1167, we more often see reproductive coercion in the form of a man refusing to wear a condom or let her use birth control (throwing away birth control pills, for example), or forcing a woman to engage in sexual behavior in which she does not want to participate. We seldom if ever have encountered a case where a woman was forced to have an abortion. It is more common that a woman trying to achieve safety and freedom from an abuser will decide she should not have another child due to the violence, economic issues and the like, but her abuser will not allow her to make that choice. Forcing a woman to have a child ties the woman to the abuser.

The "Whereas" clauses of this bill, ironically couched in terms of freedom of choice for women (see p. 2, lines 4-6), make it starkly plain this is simply an anti-abortion bill dressed up in the guise of seeking to assist vulnerable women.

A much better policy would be to strengthen our criminal laws on assault and sexual violence, and increase prosecution under existing laws. In addition, funding more services for victims would offer the greatest chance for victims to live free of their abusers.

The Women's Law Center strongly believes that reproductive choice, including whether or not to seek an abortion is essential for the health and well-being of women in Maryland. We therefore urge an unfavorable vote on HB 1167.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, membership organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change. The Women's Law Center operates two hotlines, Protection Order Advocacy and Representation Projects in Baltimore City, Baltimore County and Carroll County.