

Opinion: HB 2002 will keep politicians and child abusers out of the exam room

By Guest Columnist | The Oregonian

Elizabeth Steiner and Andrea Valderrama

Steiner, a physician, represents Senate District 17-Northwest Portland and Valderrama represents House District 47- Outer East Portland in the Oregon Legislature. They are chief sponsors of House Bill 2002.

When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, they undermined every American's right to abortion. Even here in Oregon, protections for reproductive health care previously afforded by the U.S. Constitution became unclear, especially for health care providers.

After consulting with providers, patients and legal experts, we found that just because abortion is legal in Oregon, doesn't mean it's accessible. Geographic, monetary and legal barriers to care still exist. We also need to protect those providing critical health services and ensure our transgender neighbors have access to the care they need.

The Reproductive Health and Access to Care Bill, House Bill 2002, protects providers and prioritizes the rights, health and safety of Oregonians, especially low-income Oregonians, those living outside of the I-5 corridor, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, people with disabilities and Black and brown communities.

It expands access to abortion in underserved regions, requires insurance companies to cover medically-necessary gender-affirming care and shields Oregon health care professionals who provide reproductive or gender-affirming care from out-of-state legal overreach.

HB 2002 also protects children who are victims of sexual abuse and rape by making sure that anyone—regardless of age—can access an abortion without unnecessary barriers. While providers have generally recognized the age of consent for abortion as 15, state law did not specifically set a minimum age. The protections established by *Roe v. Wade* made that unnecessary.

But the overturning of *Roe* last year now obligates us to make clear that there is no minimum age requirement to access time-sensitive abortion care.

Nothing in this bill prevents minors from including their parents in any medical decision. We know the vast majority of parents in Oregon are loving and supportive, and we want them involved. Up to 90% of minors already involve their parents when making these decisions.

Government barriers to abortion – like unnecessary parental consent hurdles – are dangerous for victims of child abuse.

Research shows that minors who don't involve their parents often do so out of fear of emotional and physical harm— one study found nearly one third of minors who did not involve parents in abortion decisions had already experienced family violence, and other research shows that those who are abused have a greater risk of getting pregnant earlier in life. Studies also show that parental notification laws put children at risk of unwanted contact with an absent or abusive parent, and place financial and logistical burdens on minors forced to navigate court procedures through a judicial bypass mechanism.

While some, including this newspaper's editorial board, have advocated for such practices for those under 15, the question at the heart of this issue is this: Should youth-- including victims of child abuse— potentially be forced to carry a pregnancy unless they can get sign off from an adult who has possibly perpetrated or enabled that harm or a judge whose political leanings could influence the decision?

Oregon voters said no in 2006 when they rejected mandatory parental notification, which included a judicial bypass mechanism for abortions.

There are also many protections in place to ensure minors who need abortion care without parental involvement are safe: Medical providers are mandatory reporters and have a legal obligation to report harm to children, including sexual abuse, to law enforcement and Child Welfare. Extensive discussion with these vulnerable youth will help determine the appropriate safety plan for each child.

HB 2002 protects the rights and safety of children with absentee or abusive parents or guardians. The last thing we need is for a child's rapist or the rapist's enabler to potentially be involved in this already traumatic event.

Join us in supporting the Reproductive Health & Access to Care Bill to keep government and sexual abusers out of the exam room so everyone can receive the timely, often life- saving, care they need.