

REMARKS ON: “ONE YEAR LATER: THE CHANGED LANDSCAPE OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF *DOBBS*”

FROM SHARON BLUGIS*

My favorite shirt has on it, “This Is Our Country Not Your Church!” It seems justices on the Supreme Court are guided by a theological agenda, not the Constitution. For years, the GOP has executed a strategy—at the Supreme Court and lower courts—to ensure that women would no longer have the right to control their own bodies, and if that meant violating constitutional norms—denying President Obama any consideration of his nominee to the Supreme Court or ramming through an unqualified candidate to the Supreme Court in the last days of the Trump presidency—so be it. Republicans “packed” the courts with the ultimate goal of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. And by the time this is read, it is quite possible that yet another right-wing religious extremist federal judge will have ended access to mifepristone.

All five of the justices who voted to reverse fifty years of abortion rights were raised Roman Catholic, and this stunning attack on bodily autonomy is backed by Christian Evangelicals who want to impose their theology on America. State houses have been taken over by those who have decided to force their personal extreme convictions onto millions of Americans—even while 70% of Americans oppose these extreme bans and views.

A friend of mine who lives in Arkansas is happily married and in her early forties, but she does not wish to have children. She told me she was now making plans as to how she will continue to obtain birth control. She believes it is only a matter of time before that right is taken away from her as well. This is

* Sharon Blugis (she/her) has dedicated her career to serving and uplifting communities and has been a dedicated advocate for Marylanders’ reproductive freedoms. With a career in public service and community advocacy, Sharon brings to Pro-Choice Maryland (PCM) expertise in community health, political organizing, and nonprofit leadership. After working ten years as a litigation paralegal, Sharon earned a Master’s in Health Science and then joined the Anne Arundel County (AACO) Health Department. She then managed the AACO Fire Department’s Fire and Life Safety office, a position she held for over ten years. In 2019, Sharon joined the AACO Executive’s Office where, among other responsibilities, she served as the County Census 2020 lead. In January 2020, she joined the Office of the Maryland Comptroller as the Community Affairs Outreach Manager. In mid-2021, she became the Executive Director of a non-profit educational organization dedicated to public safety, where she remained until joining PCM. In addition to her work experience, Sharon has partnered with several public health and gender justice organizations in mobilizing communities and fighting anti-abortion legislation in Maryland’s state and local governments. Sharon is skilled in working in political arenas and identifying opportunities for reform and advancement, as well as brainstorming with community stakeholders to build effective coalitions and executing those ideas and policies. Sharon and her husband, Adam, are residents of Annapolis. “As fortunate as we are to be living in Maryland where abortion access is protected, this last year has shown us that there really is not a ‘safe state’—and more work needs to be done.” © 2023, Sharon Blugis.

not an unreasonable fear. Since the *Dobbs* decision, numerous states have launched extensive attacks on the right of all individuals to make their own healthcare decisions. Many are breath-taking in their harshness, outlawing abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or fetal abnormalities, and *yes*, even the life of the mother.

With a bare majority in the Senate and the GOP having made Congress an embarrassing circus, we cannot rely on federal authorities to protect us, and in Maryland we are taking no chances. As I write this, the bill HB705 and SB798 *Declaration of Rights - Right to Reproductive Freedom* is moving quickly through the House and Senate. The passage of this bill will enshrine reproductive rights in the Maryland Constitution to be voted on by Marylanders in the November 2024 election. The passing of this bill will guarantee to “every person. . . the fundamental right to reproductive freedom,” including the ability to “prevent, continue or end one’s own pregnancy” without interference from the state. This legislation is singularly the most important action we can take to protect the reproductive freedom of the generations behind us.

Another bill expected to pass the 2023 Maryland Legislative Session is HB808 and SB859 *The Reproductive Health Protection Act* which states unequivocally that Maryland will not support out-of-state investigations about legal reproductive healthcare in our state. We will not support other states that seek to intimidate our providers and threaten their state residents who travel to Maryland to seek reproductive healthcare. Our courts will not process subpoenas, our state agencies will not provide records, and our law enforcement will not cooperate with states investigating legal reproductive healthcare in our state. With this bill, we will protect healthcare providers, patients, and the people who support patients in their reproductive health decisions from criminal charges, civil litigation, and administrative penalties. We will only have reproductive freedom in Maryland if we shield ourselves from the threats and intimidation tactics of other states.

And finally, as we have already seen access to birth control and reproductive care being severely limited or banned at colleges and universities in red states, Maryland is expected to pass HB477 and SB341 *Access to Reproductive Healthcare at Public Institutes of Higher Education*. Students at our four-year public higher education institutions rely on student health services to meet their core health needs, including reproductive healthcare. This legislation requires four-year public higher education institutions to develop a reproductive health access plan on how to provide or refer for the full range of reproductive health services including birth control, sexually transmitted infection prevention and treatment, and abortion services. Higher education institutions will also be required to provide 24/7 access to over-the counter (OTC) contraception, such as condoms and emergency contraception. Students should have access to OTC contraception when the need occurs.

As stated above, it has been stunning to me the degree and harshness with which the GOP seems to hate women, the trans community, LGBTQ, non-binary, or anyone in general who does not fit their theological take on what a “family” should look like. An individual has the right to lead the life they want and, most importantly, make their own healthcare decisions.

Abortion is Healthcare, and never before has that statement meant more than it does today.