

July 13, 2022

Governor Daniel McKee
Office of the Governor
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Governor McKee,

We are grateful for your recent executive action protecting people who provide or seek abortions and those who support people in obtaining care from being harmed by laws from other states that seek to criminalize care. This was an important step. The fact remains that this is an unprecedented moment, and we must do more than push back on the dangerous and discriminatory dragnet being created by abortion bans. We must do all we can to ensure access to timely, affordable, compassionate abortion care when people need it.

We, the undersigned, are urging you to sign a second executive order to direct the state employee health plan and the state Medicaid program to include health coverage for abortion. State legislation has been introduced for the past several years that would stop the bans on health coverage for abortion, but despite the importance of passing these laws, our legislators have failed to enact them. Both the 2020 and 2021 versions of the bill found that allowing for coverage of abortion could result in costs savings. The most recent bill and fiscal note in 2022 found the policy to be cost neutral. This makes clear that there is no economic reason for withholding these benefits - and as has been stated in many instances, there is very real harm in taking away insurance coverage for abortion: harm to the health of individuals and families, as well as their financial stability. There is in fact a health and economic case to be made in favor of making this important change. This is true now more than ever and you, Governor McKee, can do something about it.

As the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic ramped up in March 2020, governors across the United States issued executive orders to help address safety and health concerns. [Governors in 23 states](#) moved to protect timely access to reproductive health services and groups like the [American Medical Association](#), the [American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists](#) (ACOG) and other medical groups made it clear that abortion is essential, and that more should be done in any time of crisis to ensure timely access to care. We are in a different kind of health crisis now - one that came not from a pandemic, but from political games played on the backs of pregnant people and one that is sure to have devastating impacts.

Black women and pregnant people already face significant systemic barriers to accessing essential and time-sensitive sexual and reproductive health care services. These systemic barriers have led to stark racial health and economic disparities that have only been exacerbated in recent years. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the maternal mortality rate for Black people has increased significantly. Research also indicates that the compounding crises of maternal health and access to abortion care may worsen, not prevent, fatal intimate partner

violence. A [recent study](#) found that homicide is a leading cause of death for pregnant and postpartum people, with Black pregnant women at the greatest risk.

Forcing individuals to carry an unwanted pregnancy has been shown to put their physical and mental health at risk as well. A [comprehensive study](#) found that patients who are denied abortions are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety, lower life satisfaction, and lower self-esteem compared with those who could obtain abortions when they needed services.

Efforts to ban abortion will only exacerbate these challenges, and so do policies that push care out of reach due to financial barriers. The state Medicaid program is specifically aimed at making sure that low-income people in our state have access to critical health services, but we are impeding that important goal by taking away access to abortion for folks who use Medicaid to get their care.

It is clear that attacks on reproductive rights and abortion access are a threat to the public health and will put people of color and low-income folks at disparate risk. Every day we wait to respond is a day wasted in mitigating the public health crisis that the dismantling of Roe is already causing.

In addition to public health emergencies, there is also a precedent of governors using executive orders to improve the efficiency or update their state operations. We believe that in this case that is also a relevant use of these tools. The bans on abortion coverage impact public health programs. These programs were designed to provide insurance coverage for healthcare. Denying benefits that have a long-standing proven need, especially in this time, is actively interfering with the ability to pay for basic healthcare costs and creating additional barriers for folks who often already struggle to obtain abortions. It is wrong and contradicts the goal of these important public health and insurance programs.

There is already a national push to get President Biden to declare a public health emergency around abortion recognizing that this is a health crisis of another sort. Executive orders from governors are an important public health tool when legislation, regulation, or litigation is not immediately available or sufficient. This bill has been introduced for three sessions with majority support from voters and lawmakers. The session has now ended, so it is not immediately available and now more than ever, people cannot wait any longer.

We are urging you to take bold action during this reproductive health crisis and make sure that in Rhode Island we do all we can to address the very real obstacles that take away this important right. No more waiting. It is time to halt the bans on health coverage. We must act urgently as if our lives depend on it, because they do. We appreciate your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
- Amnesty International - Providence chapter
- BLM RI PAC
- Brown College Democrats
- COYOTE RI
- Economic Progress Institute
- Haus of Codec

- Latino Policy Institute
- LGBTQ Action RI
- League of Women Voters of Rhode Island
- Medical Students for Choice of Brown University Alpert Medical School
- Physicians for a National Health Program - RI Chapter
- Protect Our Healthcare Coalition RI
- Reclaim RI
- Rhode Island Academy of Family Physicians
- RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- RI Democratic Women's Caucus
- RI NOW
- SHIP
- SISTA Fire
- South County Huddle
- SURJ - Rhode Island
- The Womxn Project
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County - Social Justice Team
- Womens & Infants Hospital
- Women's Fund of Rhode Island

[Read the frequently asked question around gubernatorial executive orders as a public health tool.](#)