

Testimony of Valerie Peterson before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary

April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Feinstein, and other members of the Committee.

My name is Valerie R. Peterson. I am honored to be here today from Dallas, Texas to speak on behalf of ordinary women. Women may need to make what are often difficult decisions about having an abortion later in their pregnancies. I worry about their health and safety if a federal law is passed that would ban abortion after 20 weeks.

But first, I'd like to briefly tell you about my background. I grew up on the southside of Chicago in the Roseland Community. A community known for its violence, gang and drug activities. As a Junior in high school, I became pregnant and had a beautiful baby girl. I faced a lot of barriers when I sought to stay in school while raising my child. One teacher said I should drop out of school and give up my dream of going to college. But with the help of my English teacher, and my own determination to succeed, I finished high school, enrolled in college away from home, and took care of my young daughter. I attended college full-time, held a full-time job, and took care of my young daughter. During my sophomore year, I gave birth to a second daughter. I still managed to graduate from my undergrad in four years. I continued this journey with my daughters all the way through graduating with a Doctoral Degree in Education.

In July of 2015, when I got the news that I was pregnant a third time, I was excited—and shocked—because doctors had told me that I couldn't have any more children. I started prenatal care right away. While this was a surprise pregnancy, it was very much wanted.

I had a very tough first trimester but I tried to keep a positive outlook. The doctors determined that because of my age and my blood pressure, this was a high risk pregnancy. A maternal-fetal medicine specialist took over my care. Seeing a specialist brought more tests, more appointments, and more stress. But I did everything that I needed to do to ensure a healthy, viable pregnancy and everything was moving along well.

All of that changed when I had an ultrasound in early October, 2015. I received very concerning information about my son's brain and nasal bone. In my journal entry on October 4, I wrote that "I KNOW God gave me you for more reasons than I could have ever imagined." Even with the worrying ultrasound, I thought and believed that my son would be fine.

Several weeks later, I received the devastating news that my son had Alobar Holoprosencephaly, which meant that his brain hadn't developed properly. I also learned that he had some facial abnormalities because of the lack of brain development. In my journal entry on October 23, 2015, I wrote "All I can say is that it's not your fault and its not my fault....this is 100% incompatible with life outside of my womb."

In that same journal post, I wrote: "Your brain is supposed to look like...a butterfly as the doctor explained to me. [But] your brain was full of fluid with no connection between the brain and

spinal cord and no separation of the left and right hemisphere. There is no treatment and there is no cure.”

My doctor explained that most babies with this condition miscarry early in pregnancy and only 3% make it full term. Those that do make it full term end up dying...most times during the birthing process. I had two choices: continue to carry my son until he let go or terminate the pregnancy.

While extremely agonizing, I made the devastating decision to terminate. Once I saw the pictures of his brain, I knew that continuing to carry this pregnancy would have traumatic emotional and physical consequences. And not just for me but also for my two children, who were excited about having another sibling.

I asked the doctor if he could admit me to the hospital that day. He explained that I would need to be referred to an abortion provider. After my doctor called the clinic, I was told I would have to wait three or four weeks for the next available appointment. I would then have to wait longer because I would be forced to get counseling and an ultrasound and then be forced to wait 24 more hours before I could get the abortion.

I didn't understand why at the time, but I have since learned that the state of Texas had already passed an abortion law that had shut down more than half of the abortion clinics, creating these long wait times. And that Texas law was forcing me to do all of these things, like counseling and an ultrasound, before getting the abortion, even though I had already consulted with doctors and made my decision.

There was no way I could wait that long. Physically, mentally and emotionally, I couldn't stand the pain of waiting several weeks for a procedure that would have to take place over several days. In my mind, one unnecessary additional day was one more than I could bear.

Time wasn't on my side either. Not only would I be carrying a baby I knew wouldn't survive, but that kind of wait could push me past 20 weeks of pregnancy. And Texas makes almost all abortions illegal after that point.

Out of desperation and pain, I booked last minute travel arrangements for an appointment I scheduled in Florida. This wasn't a cheap decision. I spent nearly \$5,000 on last-minute airfare, hotel, rental car, and the cost of the procedure, which wasn't covered by my health insurance. While I was thankful to have the means to cover all the associated costs, I couldn't help but think about women who seek abortion care but don't have the means I do. What would the outcome be for them...I hurt even more thinking about it. Women seek abortion care for many reasons. In my case it was the health of my baby, but for others it could be that it takes time to save the money or that clinics and providers are hard to access because of restrictive laws like the one you're debating today.

In a journal entry written a day prior to the abortion, I wrote: “I decided to name you Ethan because Ethan means strong... I am blessed that you were able to come into my life. Now I'm giving you back to God. Please know that I will always love you and you will forever be in my heart.”

The decision to have an abortion is not made callously or without thoughtful consideration and care. Women across the nation are risking their jobs, spending their life savings, driving hundreds of miles, crossing state lines as I had to — all to exercise a right that the Constitution protects. It's hurtful to think that legislators who know nothing of my life or situation wants to deny me the right and dignity to make the difficult decision that was right for me and my family.

I knew that Ethan came into my life for a reason. It is the very reason that I'm sitting here at this hearing sharing my story with the Committee and with the world. Ethan gave me personal experience on how bills such as the one being considered here, S. 160, significantly impact the lives of those that must face and live with the consequences of the written legislation. I often wonder what I would have done if the anomaly had been detected after the 20-week mark? Because my pregnancy was high-risk, I had frequent ultrasounds and I learned about the fetal anomaly earlier in my pregnancy. But what about other women who have normal pregnancies and go in for their 20-week ultrasound -- what happens to them?

I want you to know that S. 160, if it became law, would harm women and their families.

Women seek abortions later in pregnancy for a range of reasons. Mine is my own, and I know mine because I lived it. But I know that none of you could know what was best for my family and me. Just as none of us are in a position to know what's best for other women who seek similar care.

I sincerely hope that no one close to you that you love dearly will have to walk in the shoes that I had to 'travail' in during this journey. It was a process...a grim one. Devastating, life-altering decisions had to be made, but I say this knowing that, oftentimes, up-close and personal experience is the BEST experience and teacher that one can have. It is my hope that others don't have to learn the way I did.

This Committee must consider the harmful impact this bill would have on the health and well-being of so many women and their families. I have come here to share my story -- reliving my pain -- to implore of you to stop these efforts to restrict abortion. If the bill you are considering— S. 160—were to pass and ban abortions after 20 weeks, women will be prevented from getting the critical health care they need.

I urge this Committee to reject Bill S. 160.