

Testimony of Gretchen Raffa, MSW
Director, Public Policy, Advocacy & Strategic Engagement
Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, Inc.

In support of proposed House Bill 6540, *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV*

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and honorable members of the Public Health Committee, my name is Gretchen Raffa, Director of Public Policy, Advocacy and Strategic Engagement at Planned Parenthood of Southern New England testifying in support of proposed House Bill 6540, *An Act Concerning the Prevention of HIV*. Planned Parenthood of Southern New England serves over 60,000 patients yearly for reproductive and sexual health services in 16 health centers across the state. As a health care provider and advocate, Planned Parenthood's top priority is ensuring that all individuals have access to the health care and information they need, including the full range of reproductive health services and education, to make positive sexual and reproductive health decisions. We believe that all people deserve high-quality, affordable health care and compassionate, nonjudgmental sexual health information, no matter who they are or where they live.

People achieve reproductive freedom when they have full autonomy over their bodies and lives – this not only includes access to health care, but it is the ability to live without fear of harm from discriminatory policies. We believe that the ability to access health care are basic human rights and we must work to eliminate unnecessary hurdles or barriers for people to access that care, including young people's access to preventative health care. House Bill 6540 is one step in addressing a barrier to preventative health care for youth.

Currently in Connecticut, minors have the right to consent to HIV/AIDS testing and treatment, sexually transmitted infection testing and treatment, reproductive health care, substance abuse treatment, and mental health treatment. Yet youth who are at substantial risk of HIV infection cannot independently consent to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a prescription-based daily medication for the prevention of HIV. The brand name, Truvada, provides 92%-99% reduction in HIV risk for HIV-negative individuals who take the pills every day as directed. Instead, youth can only consent to treatment after an HIV diagnosis. House bill 6540 would ensure that youth at risk for HIV have direct access to PrEP by updating existing state law and address this harmful gap in health services for youth before they are burdened with life-long illness and treatment.ⁱ

Despite progress in HIV treatment, HIV remains a significant public health concern. More than 10,000 people are living with HIV in Connecticut.ⁱⁱ Gay and bisexual men are the population most affected by HIV in the United States, with higher infection rates among men of color.ⁱⁱⁱ And women are at risk, especially Black women. After gay men and transgender women of any race, who have the highest risk of infection, Black women are the group most vulnerable to HIV, according to the CDC.^{iv} There is still no cure available for HIV, and treatment is complex, expensive, and life-long. By allowing minors to consent to PrEP, we would reduce the risk of HIV infection which is a public health goal we can all agree on.

Planned Parenthood's doors are open to everyone — regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity, gender expression. We are a trusted medical provider offering confidential services to youth and an entry point to preventative care. For young people we offer resources and support for talking to family members or other trusted adults about issues related to sexual health, identity and HIV. As we know, stigma, homophobia, and privacy concerns pose obstacles to HIV related testing and treatment for youth. Many of the youth who would most benefit from PrEP are unable to access it due to fear of parental rejection. Planned Parenthood offers a safe setting for health care, counseling, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections including HIV. We have joined other providers in Connecticut in offering PrEP services to our patients at all our health centers.

We strongly support H.B. 6540 and urge the committee to vote favorably for this important bill to protect young people's access to the health care they need. No young person should have to wait until after contracting HIV to access care. This bill is an important step to protect the health and safety of Connecticut's youth. Planned Parenthood will continue to fight for policies that protect the rights of all people to ensure our patients and our communities have what they need to live healthy, safer and self-determined lives. Thank you for your consideration of this bill.

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ⁱ Conn. Gen. Stat. §19a-592

ⁱⁱ Connecticut Department of Public Health (2019), HIV in Connecticut: Data Reported Through 2018, <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DPH/HIV-Surveillance/CT-HIV-Fact-Sheet.pdf?la=en>

ⁱⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control HIV and Gay and Bisexual Men <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/msm/index.html>

^{iv} To Halt HIV, Advocates Push For PrEP Outreach To Black Women, NPR https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/02/08/691740052/to-halt-hiv-advocates-push-for-prep-outreach-to-black-women?fbclid=IwAR2aYKXFbXpVt3PW00pR2kjdNSPrATL4q1-a3uCPtsaPsnY2SKsn08fknVg&utm_campaign=coschedule%20Women%27s%20Health%20Imperative&utm_content=To%20Halt%20HIV,%20Advocates%20Push%20For%20PrEP%20Outreach%20To%20Black%20Women