

FACT SHEET

Congress Must Lift the Ban for Abortion Services at Military Facilities

September 2013

Members of the military and their dependents are currently prohibited from receiving abortion services at military hospitals except in cases where a woman's life is endangered or the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. Senator Kristin Gillibrand and Congresswoman Louise Slaughter have introduced legislation, the Military Access to Reproductive Care and Health (MARCH) for Military Women Act, to repeal this unfair and unsafe law.¹ This bill would ensure women have access to abortion care – paid for with their own funds – no matter where they are stationed.

The Current Ban Can Create Insurmountable Barriers for Servicewomen Seeking Access to Safe Reproductive Healthcare

Unable to turn to their base medical facility for abortion care, servicewomen and dependents of service members can be forced into dangerous and desperate situations. For a woman serving where abortion is illegal, unsafe, or unavailable, she may be left with no options. Even if a servicewoman is able to find a medical provider that can perform the procedure, she may encounter significant hurdles, including:

- Traveling hundreds or even thousands of miles to access a clinic;
- Being unable to speak the language of the abortion provider and support staff;
- Lacking medical records to share with the medical staff;
- Compromising a servicewoman's privacy if she must inform her commander of the abortion in explaining her leave request to travel for the procedure.

Moreover, in the instances where there will be significant travel and other costs, a servicewoman may delay the procedure as she saves money to cover the costs. Such delays can increase the health risks of the procedure.

The Current Ban Hurts Our Servicewomen and Their Families

The current ban fails to include an exception for circumstances when a woman's health is in danger, underscoring just how indefensible the current ban is. Moreover, the ban does not account for other circumstances, such as where a servicewoman or dependent is carrying a pregnancy in which there is a severe fetal anomaly. Denying care to a family facing dire circumstances such as these is cruel and hurts our military families.

The Current Ban Denies Our Servicewomen Their Constitutional Rights

It is indefensible that women who volunteer to serve in our military and have committed their lives to the defense of our country are denied access to a constitutional right. For our servicewomen stationed where there are simply no options for an abortion, the denial of access is the denial of the right.

The Department of Defense Supports a Repeal of the Ban

The Department of Defense supported lifting this harmful restriction in 2011¹ and stated in a letter to Congress that it “supports this bill because it would restore a policy that would not prohibit Service members and military dependents, including nearly 50,000 Servicewomen stationed overseas, from obtaining abortion services at Military Treatment Facilities using private funds.”²

1 Military Access to Reproductive Care and Health for Military Women Act (“MARCH for Military Women Act”), H.R. 1389 and S. 777.

2 Letter from Elizabeth King, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs to The Honorable Carl Levin (December 2011).