

May 2, 2023

Dear Chair Wiklund, Chair Liebling and Members of the HHS Conference Committee,

As the President and CEO of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, I write to urge the conference committee to move forward proposals to:

- expand access to reproductive health care by funding community-based clinics; giving patients choices about who can accompany them in the birth process, and increasing reimbursements for doulas and all reproductive health care including abortion and other services;
- increase funding for the Homeless Youth Act and Safe Harbor to prevent and respond to youth homelessness, increase services for survivors of sex trafficking; and
- create systems to build health equity in Minnesota with investments in medical education; offices led by the Department of Health; and community focused grant programs to combat disparities faced by Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color.

For 40 years, the Women's Foundation has invested more than \$45 million in organizations across the state, and advanced policies to create a state where women, girls, and their families can thrive. Women are at the center of families and are often the primary caretakers of their households. When women have access to safe and affordable reproductive healthcare services, they have better outcomes for healthy lives and pathways to prosperity.

Our research with the Center on Women, Gender, & Public Policy at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School shows that access to reproductive health care is not truly available for many patients in Minnesota. Lack of access to care has significant consequences for the people most affected, especially our most marginalized Minnesotans – Black, Indigenous, refugees and immigrants, rural, and people with lower incomes.

The funding in this bill for Family Planning grants is essential to creating more access across the state for better outcomes. The Department of Health's report on this program indicates that the health care providers across the state who receive these funds are making a difference. In 2022,

they counseled 19,558 individuals on reproductive life planning and contraceptive options and provided 15,485 people with a range of family planning method services. And yet the gaps in care persist. Additional funds are needed to create access for more Minnesotans.

Patients across Minnesota deserve to have full autonomy in their reproductive health from who accompanies them in their birth process to their choice in provider. This is why we support increased reimbursement rates for doulas and giving patients the right to have a person of their choice present. We also urge increasing reimbursement for abortion and other reproductive health services from the amounts in the current bills to 50%.

Full reproductive health care creates economic opportunities, including the ability to fulfill educational dreams, start a business, and grow a career. We urge you to remove harmful barriers and create more equitable access. Without it, women cannot make decisions that are in the best interests of their children, their families, and themselves. Research on economic disparities shows that families thrive when women and girls are healthy and well.

We also support the funding for preventing and responding to exploitation with investments in services and housing in Safe Harbor and the Homeless Youth Act. Safe Harbor is the foundation of preventing and addressing sex trafficking. We need to build upon this foundation with vital resources for the organizations who provide direct outreach, including emotional, financial, and family reunification support to survivors.

To meet the needs across the state, we need investments in emergency shelter and housing for those who are at risk and those who have survived sex trafficking and exploitation. Creating safe, supportive, and accessible housing for youth without stable homes or who could become homeless will limit traffickers' ability to use one of their most effective tools - the promise of shelter - to lure youth into trafficking and harm. For survivors, we need to create opportunities for a better future, with supportive services including access to trauma-informed healing, education and training, and safe housing.

The need for additional services is statewide. Trafficking is not limited by zip code in Minnesota, which is why the Safe Harbor Law established a network of navigators and shelters across the state. Still, there are far too many survivors of trafficking who need access to the places and services where they can heal. We need to take steps to provide necessary resources.

In addition, we support provisions to enhance health equity in Minnesota by creating grant programs and dedicated offices to address the health disparities faced by Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. For far too long we have discussed health outcome disparities in

Minnesota. Proposals in the conference committee can make significant investments to move forward with action.

We urge inclusion of these important investments in the conference committee report to make Minnesota a place where women, girls, and gender-expansive people from all backgrounds across the state can be safe, healthy and thrive.

Thank you,



Gloria Perez
President & CEO