

Protect Pregnant Patients

Support SSB 5140

Anyone who is suffering a miscarriage should be confident that they will receive the best care possible when they go to the hospital. Yet in Washington state, care is often delayed or denied for patients with miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies due to a health system's institutional policies. These policies, which prohibit pregnancy terminations except in very limited circumstances, are discriminatory, serve no medical purpose, and place the health and lives of pregnant patients at risk.

Pregnant Patients Are Not Receiving Necessary Care

Doctors and nurses must be allowed to provide medically necessary, evidence-based care when a pregnant patient's health or life is at serious risk. However, as health system affiliations continue to proliferate in Washington state, more and more doctors and nurses are being prohibited from providing patients with needed care when they are experiencing a miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy. Such prohibitions place pregnant patients at risk, harm the relationship between patients and providers and create significant barriers to health care access.

This Is Happening in Washington

We know SSB 5140 is necessary because patients and providers across Washington have shared their stories.

Alison learned she needed a surgery that would end her much-wanted pregnancy while overcome with pain in a Bellingham hospital bed. She was septic, her fever was not responding to medication, and the pain in her abdomen was excruciating. But the life-saving surgery Alison's doctor recommended would have to wait. The only hospital near Alison's home does not allow pregnancy terminations except in very limited circumstances. A hospital ethics committee would decide whether to approve Alison's surgery. This meant Alison's doctor could not use his medical judgment to treat his patient. While Alison waited for the committee's decision, she had a spontaneous miscarriage in the bathroom. Alison survived but she was horrified that the hospital put her life and health at risk for no medical reason.

Sarah (a pseudonym) was 21 weeks pregnant when she began bleeding and cramping. Her high-risk OB-GYN told her she was having a miscarriage and needed immediate care at a hospital. The fetus was not viable at such an early stage in the pregnancy and any delay put Sarah at risk of infection, sepsis, and even death. Sarah's primary OB-GYN was contacted and agreed that Sarah needed to be admitted. But the hospital where she sought care refused to admit her, citing the health system's opposition to pregnancy terminations. In response, Sarah's OB-GYN urged her husband to drive her 45 minutes away to another hospital, where she was finally treated. In pain, at high risk of complications and facing the loss of her pregnancy, Sarah was forced into a desperate scramble for care due to a hospital policy that is not driven by medical standards.

This Bill Ensures Access to Timely, Evidence-Based Medical Care and Addresses Health Care Inequities Exacerbated by COVID-19

These health system restrictions disproportionately harm women, people who live in rural communities where access can be limited to a single facility, and patients with limited economic resources who may have difficulty paying for additional travel and medical expenses. Further, access to care is even more critical during the pandemic. Forcing patients to visit multiple providers and institutions or spend long periods of time at a hospital without medical reason increases the risk of virus exposure for patients and practitioners. No matter where a patient lives or seeks medical treatment, they should be able to get the care they need.

Reform Is Needed Now

The legislature must act to protect pregnant patients and ensure health entities are acting in the best interests of the patients they serve. SSB 5140 would prevent health entities from interfering with a qualified health care practitioner's ability to provide care to a patient who is miscarrying or experiencing an ectopic pregnancy, and whose health or life is at risk.