

March 13, 2023

Chairman Weisz and Members of the House Human Services Committee,

For the record my name is Laura Frisch. I am here today as a person with experience with unplanned pregnancy, and as a staff member of the Community Violence Intervention Center (CVIC) in Grand Forks, ND, a dual domestic violence and sexual assault agency.

Twenty-seven years ago I was a college student finishing my degree in social work when I discovered that I was pregnant. I was taking birth control and was in a relationship—though I wasn't sure what my boyfriend's reaction would be to the news. By the time I began to suspect I was pregnant and went to student health, I was 9 weeks pregnant.

To say I was devastated is an understatement. I was a single, uninsured, scared, unmarried, broke college student without a degree who had hoped to get my master's degree after graduation. I felt trapped and hopeless, that I'd let myself and my parents down. My boyfriend was supportive and promised to stick by me, but I knew I'd need to make a decision with no guarantees—after all, 50% of marriages don't make it and I had no idea what the success rate for relationships with unplanned pregnancy was, but I figured it was worse. I prayed that I'd have a miscarriage so that my life wouldn't be completely unraveled. I considered whether an abortion was something I wanted. For the next couple of months, I wished I could disappear.

Fortunately I was able to get support services. I was able to get free counseling through a crisis pregnancy program. I qualified for Medical Assistance and started seeing a doctor for prenatal care. At 20 weeks pregnant, I finally told my parents. They were crushed, but pledged to support me in any way they could.

10 years later, I was married to my boyfriend and we had a second child. I not only finished college, but I completed my master's degree. When I got the news that a dear family member was pregnant at the age of 14 and was considering adoption, my husband and I offered to adopt the baby so that she could remain part of the baby's life but not have to assume the responsibility of raising a child. She took several weeks to think about it and eventually agreed.

In some ways my experience sounds like a pro-life message, but I am here testifying in opposition to SB 2150. I had a supportive relationship and ultimately supportive parents, but I needed the time and space to come to a decision that was right for me. I'm so grateful that the laws back then gave me the time I needed to come to my own decision.

I want you to picture that scared, desperate college student, facing an unplanned pregnancy, but instead of a supportive boyfriend, she's a traumatized sexual assault victim. Instead of wishing she could disappear, she's contemplating suicide and worried that the person who assaulted her will track her down and harm her again. She's doing her best to move on, but sometimes she can't even leave her apartment because she is paralyzed by fear. Now picture a young girl at age 13. Her uncle has been sexually abusing her for several years. She's not sure what's going on with her body or even how to put into words what's been happening to her. How many weeks along do you think it will be before she realizes she is pregnant? How long until she tells her parents, or will she wait until someone can tell she is pregnant? These are the kinds of experiences I have heard during my 26 years working at CVIC. The desperation

and despair I felt in my own situation pales in comparison to the trauma of sexual assault or abuse, and an unplanned pregnancy as a result of that violence is simply unimaginable.

In ND, we take a lot of pride in our independence and not forcing decisions on people that we know have the wisdom to make themselves. We didn't mandate the COVID vaccine or even masks, even though that allowed the virus to spread and kill other people who became infected. Like many of you, I lost family members who made that decision, including my uncle, because we recognized that people had the right to choose for themselves. We don't mandate that everyone be required to be an organ donor, even though that would save lives, including lives of children. We certainly wouldn't force that on a family during a traumatic time, like losing a loved one to an auto accident, because we know the decisions are gut wrenching, and the government shouldn't be the one to decide what is right for a family.

Women in our state, particularly victims of violence, deserve that same dignity and supportive space. Let's not try to force them into decisions before they even know they're pregnant. When someone feels trapped, the antidote is to help them see that they have options. When someone feels desperate, the antidote is to give them time and space, not rush them into a decision. As policy makers, you can support life by making policies that fund safety net services that support women and girls in a time of need. Several of those bills are currently moving through the legislature, and they make good, ND common sense. We also have a bill giving additional time to sexual assault survivors to report law enforcement due to a recognition that trauma has devastating consequences and may create a disabling mental condition. Another good, common-sense policy.

Let's stay out of national trends and adopt policies that acknowledge that this is an extremely complicated issue that only someone who has walked a mile in those shoes truly understands.

Please keep exceptions for rape and incest victims intact, give reasonable time to traumatized individuals to make difficult decisions, and vote Do Not Pass on SB 2150 as it is currently written.