



Post-Roe Policy Hearing
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
“The Consequences of Enforcement”

Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Democratic Policy Committee

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Testimony of : Saleemah McNeil, MS, MFT
Founder of Oshun Family Center

Good Afternoon Everyone and to the House Democratic Policy Committee,

Thank you for taking this time to hear our stories and actively plan to combat this growing epidemic of Maternal Mortality. My name is Saleemah McNeil, I am a Reproductive Psychotherapist, Founder of Oshun Family Center, curator of the Maternal Wellness Village, a Maternal Health researcher and a survivor of a traumatic birth experience. However, none of that matters when the only thing on trial and being openly discussed is the functionality of my uterus. In 2006, the title of mother made me a morbidity statistic. I gave birth to a healthy baby boy, my pregnancy went well and there were no health concerns until 37wks and 3 days gestation. ON this particular day, I went to my regularly scheduled prenatal appointment and was sent straight to the hospital due to high blood pressure. I was never informed of the severity pertaining to my condition. When I arrived at the hospital, my blood pressure was 202 over 153, which is medically classified as “stroke range” and the only cure is the delivery of my baby, the culprit, preeclampsia. After a horrific emergency c/section and 9 days in the hospital recovering, I went home.

But let’s rewind 30 weeks, to the moment I found out I was expecting. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. I was 18 years old, recently enrolled in college, working full time, living independently and now growing a life?! I was unsure of what our future would hold and I heavily contemplated all of my options. I started at an undercover christian based center that offered/advertised FREE pregnancy tests. I went in and spoke to the kindest older white woman who compassionately spoke to me about my options. When I told her I contemplated termination, she asked me to watch a short 5min video that would provide additional information and she left the room. I sat alone, in a room, watching a 5 minute video of an abortion being performed, the patient’s body was shaking uncontrollably as she held the hand of a nurse who talked her through the procedure because she was not sedated. The video ended with the patient’s piercing screams! The woman reenters the room with a folder of resources for prenatal care. I was

mortified, confused and angry when I left the office because I went with the intention of openly exploring my options, not to be scared straight. Her parting words, “I just want to help save your soul because HELL doesn't deserve you”. Luckily, I had done my own research and I was supported by my provider who talked through things with me. I was able to make an informed decision by 15 weeks gestation to continue the pregnancy to bring my son earthside but I almost lost my life doing so.

Welcome to Gilead! However, this is not fiction, we are not handmaids...yet and reproductive rights have been rolled back. Historically, this issue has disproportionately impacted Black birthing people. In the late 1850s, the newly established American Medical Association began calling for the criminalization of abortion, partly in an effort to eliminate doctors' competitors such as midwives and homeopaths. We still haven't fully recovered. Additionally, racists, alarmed by the country's growing population of immigrants, were anti-abortion because they feared declining birth rates among white, American-born, Protestant women. In 1869, the Catholic Church banned abortion at any stage of pregnancy, while in 1873, Congress passed the Comstock law, which made it illegal to distribute contraceptives and abortion-inducing drugs through the U.S. mail. By the 1880s, abortion was outlawed across most of the country. Systemic change did not happen until 1973, *Roe V. Wade* which was only 49 years ago.

What does all of this mean for Black birthing people in Amerikkka?! In addition to the immediate and devastating impacts of the fall of *Roe v. Wade*, the *Dobbs* decision also threatens to exacerbate the already dire maternal health crisis in this country that Black and Indigenous women and birthing people in particular face. It is always unconscionable to force the continuation of an unwanted pregnancy but for Black women and other populations who have been historically marginalized, it is particularly immoral and dangerous. With maternal mortality rates already climbing for Black women, the loss of federal protections for abortion access is particularly alarming: recent research found that if abortion were to be

banned nationwide, it would increase maternal deaths by 24 percent overall, and by nearly 40 percent for Black women. We need your help to stop this increase. Overturning Roe v. Wade will NOT stop people from getting abortions, it will prevent people from obtaining safe abortions and proper aftercare.

At Oshun Family Center, we serve Black birthing families in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties. This has gravely impacted the population of people we serve as they make decisions for their families. We have clients that identify in the Queer community who utilized medical based fertility options such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) to expand their families, we have single parents by choice who utilize medical intervention to grow their family, we also see those contemplating termination for a variety of reasons and those seeking support for mental wellness following a termination. This is a safe haven for processing your choices and decisions pertaining to their body and their families. I will close by sharing a short excerpt from a submission shared directly with us, I have obtained full permission to include this testimony and the identity of this person is protected.

“I’ve had four medical and surgical abortions. None by choice. In my time building my family, seven pregnancies would never reach a live birth. Four of those losses had the potential to cause irreparable harm, permanent loss of fertility, and my death.

In a post Roe v. Wade world, that would look like carrying my 13+6 pregnancy even longer than the 8 days I had already carried the lifeless fetus. In my 11 week loss, it would look like waiting longer than the 10 days I had already been carrying the decaying fetus. It would look like waiting beyond those 10 days despite the fever which was already developing, indicating an infection was brewing.

It would look like bleeding out from retained products of conception following an incomplete miscarriage where a pharmacist could deny the lifesaving cytotec. It would be bleeding out following an early miscarriage with retained tissue where a D&E was needed after a week of heavy bleeding, clots and all.

Abortion care is lifesaving. Whether the embryo, fetus, or baby still has a heartbeat or not, there are numerous examples and reasons an abortion is necessary. Only licensed medical providers AND patients can safely determine what care is appropriate for them.” -S.P.

Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to our stories about our bodies. I hope this is the beginning of us collaboratively working together to build a solid foundation for reproductive and birth justice.

~Saleemah McNeil CLC, MS, MFT

Shared with permission S.P. (Additional; Full testimony, Oshun Family Center)

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In a world where people don't know what a fallopian tube is or where the luteal phase lands in a menstrual cycle, how can it be safe for those same people to dictate medical care?

In nature, approximately 50% of fertilized eggs do not become a viable pregnancy. Even the very basics of natural biology recognize not every embryo is meant to become a live birth.

In a country with abysmal maternal fetal outcomes, Roe v. Wade being overturned can quickly become a death sentence to even more.

We live in a world where systemic racism and social determinants impact outcomes to the point Black and Brown women are 4xs more likely to die from pregnancy and childbirth related complications. We live in a world where Black infants are significantly less likely to reach their first birthday.

How do we push forced pregnancy and childbirth on people where we are unable to even care for those willingly choosing pregnancy?

How do we eliminate care amongst the 1 in 8 couples facing infertility who risk lack of access to reproductive healthcare assistance should personhood bills at conception be passed?

If overturning Roe v. Wade is about saving life, it would directly reduce maternal mortality in this country, especially among Black and Brown women. If it was about saving life, it would clearly leave medical decisions to licensed medical providers so they can help their patients be their healthiest. If it was about saving life, we would see more research into infertility care, reducing congenital birth defects, reducing the risk of premature birth which impacts 1 in 10. It would address the hundreds of thousands of kids in foster care waiting for homes.

But it is not about saving life. It is simply a political act of control written by people without medical experience and without basic understanding of biology. It is a death sentence for those needing healthcare. It is a lifelong diagnosis of trauma for the person forced to carry in a situation which, for any reason, isn't ideal or safe in their life.

What are we as a society, as a country, gaining on a population level by overturning Roe v. Wade? For our current living and breathing population, we are not gaining any positive measurable outcomes. We will not see healthier people. We will not see reduced healthcare costs. We will not see improved mental health statistics. We will not see improved Maternal infant health statistics. Simply put, there is nothing gained.