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STATEMENT ON INTRODUCTION OF ROE V. WADE LEGISLATION

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State legislative leaders have attempted to assure us that there is no need to pass legislation this year to protect a woman's right to reproductive freedom because Roe v. Wade remains intact. But organizations like ours that have been fighting this issue in Rhode Island for 45 years, and the women who are directly affected by restrictions on choice, must disagree.

The second part of the Reproductive Health Care Act contains the detritus of the Rhode Island legislature's attacks on abortion rights over the decades. In 1973, immediately after Roe v. Wade was decided, the General Assembly passed a law thumbing its nose at the ruling and declared that life begins at conception. In the 1980's, the General Assembly passed a law forcing victims of domestic violence to notify their abusive spouses if they were going to get an abortion. In 2001, a federal court was forced to strike down a state law that would have banned some abortions in the second trimester of pregnancy even if the woman's health was at risk. Even though these laws are unenforceable, their continued presence in the General Laws is a reminder of the fragility of reproductive choice in this state.

While these attacks on abortion rights have died down in recent years at the state level, what is now happening at the federal level is frightening. The current Presidential administration has literally locked up young teenagers in its custody in an effort to prevent them from getting an abortion – including, in at least one instance, a minor whose pregnancy was the result of rape. In the U.S. Senate last month, a majority voted in support of banning abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy without any consideration of the woman's health. At the judicial level, the Supreme Court doesn't have to overturn Roe v. Wade directly in order to erode this critical right to privacy and autonomy bit by bit.

It is time to stop calling the threat to women's reproductive freedom hypothetical. It is not – it is very real. Women deserve to be assured that their legal right to an abortion is safe in Rhode Island – and they have a right to be assured now, not when it is too late. The question isn't whether we should wait until Roe is overturned to do something about it. The question is, why hasn't this protection already been enacted?

We hope that legislators will pass this legislation promptly. To paraphrase the House Majority Leader, it is time to put women at the table before the Supreme Court puts them on the menu.