

House Energy and Commerce Committee
Health Subcommittee
Hearing on “Protecting Women’s Access to Reproductive Health Care”
February 12, 2020

Written Testimony of Holly Alvarado
In Support of H.R.2975: The Women’s Health Protection Act
Submitted for the record on February 10, 2020

Thank you Chairwoman Eshoo and Ranking Member Burgess for inviting me to testify here today. My name is Holly Alvarado and I am here to share my story. In 2009 I faced multiple barriers in accessing abortion care due to burdensome and medically unnecessary state abortion restrictions. I’m here today to share my story so that you can see how important it is that you pass the Women’s Health Protection Act.

I served in the United States Air Force from 2006 to 2011 as a law enforcement officer. I was motivated to serve my country as the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants. I had seen my family build their American dream and felt grateful to this nation. The September 11th attacks further flamed the fires of my patriotism and I enlisted in 2006. In my time I served honorably in South Korea, Afghanistan, earned the rank of Staff Sergeant, and eventually became an Instructor. I am proud of my service to this country.

In 2009 I was given orders for a deployment with a 10 person team. Two weeks before my deployment I was busy preparing for my 6-7 month time away from my duty station. I was gathering supplies, packing, and moving my apartment into a storage unit. During this time, in the middle of a Walmart picking out socks, vomiting in the middle of an aisle, I realized I could be pregnant. It felt like I was a fast car going 100 miles an hour and then someone hit the breaks. It was like the slow motion feeling during a car accident, where everything is suspended in the air milliseconds from destruction.

I knew immediately that I did not want to continue this pregnancy. I knew me. 22 year old me knew what now 33 year old me wanted out of life and this pregnancy was not part of my plan. Even though this was an immediate feeling, I took the time to think about how I was not financially or emotionally in a stage of my life where I was ready to continue a pregnancy and raise a child. While serving in the military I saw the many challenges facing servicewomen with children. The work environment was not conducive to having a stable family life, especially if the expectant mother was enlisted. I had heard commanders and supervisors say “If the military wanted you to have a baby, they would have issued it to you.” Uncertain duty hours,

assignments, and professional responsibilities further compounded the fact that I was not going to continue my pregnancy. I made a deeply ethical and moral decision by myself and was resolute on what I needed to do.

I knew I needed to immediately coordinate what I would need to end my pregnancy. I needed an appointment, an abortion, approval to take leave from work, and to find time in between all of these things to continue preparing for deployment in two weeks. I called Planned Parenthood of North Dakota and learned that the closest facility that could perform abortions was in Fargo, ND, approximately 2 hours away. North Dakota only has one abortion clinic, which means longer wait times for an appointment. They did not have any appointments in the next two weeks and were unable to help me. I was encouraged to call St. Paul, MN's Planned Parenthood office, 4 hours away. I called and scheduled my first and second appointment.

The first thing I needed to do was ask for military leave since I would be leaving the duty area and I would need to be gone for a period of time before deployment. My supervisor approved my leave and knew that I would be leaving the duty area but I had omitted that I would be leaving the area to receive an abortion. I had omitted my reason for leaving the duty area because he would have had the option to decline my leave if he personally disagreed with my decision. If I had chosen to escalate a disagreement between me and my supervisor, it ultimately would have ended up on the desk of my unit commander who had the power to change my professional career. I was put in a position where I had to protect and advocate for myself when it should have never been in anyone else's hands to make a decision for me and my future.

My first appointment was needed to verify my pregnancy with an ultrasound and urinalysis, they would give me information, and an ultrasound picture. I needed to book a second appointment for the procedure itself. This was not due to any medical reason and it was certainly not my preference. Minnesota state law mandates a 24 hour waiting period between the first appointment and day of the procedure. And because of the wait times for an appointment at the clinic I would have to wait 3 days between appointments. I would spend a total of 4 days in Minnesota without resources. The day before my appointment I would have to wait for a mandatory phone call. I was told to wait by my cell phone and be somewhere with good service because I would need to answer and couldn't miss the call. If I had missed the call they would have had to cancel my appointment for the next day and I would have to start the process all over again. If that had happened I would have missed my deployment deadline, I would have been financially unable to repeat this process, and close to the gestational limit of having an abortion. In that phone call I would be told I have options like adoption or continuing the pregnancy, that I am eligible to receive child support and WIC, that my procedure could be dangerous and prevent me from having children in the future, and then I would need to confirm my appointment for the next day if I did not want to continue the pregnancy.

I knew that things they had said to me were biased, that they were required to tell them to me because of state law, and ended the phone call secure in my decision to not continue the pregnancy. I confirmed my appointment for the next morning. The state laws, the biased counseling, the waiting period, the protesters in front of Planned Parenthood, all felt like a slap in the face. I was uncompromising on my decision, I knew I needed an abortion. I did not need or benefit from the waiting period, the 600 mile round trip, or the biased counseling. It was not a cold or bleak decision, rather a compassionate one for myself and the life and potential I wanted in my own future.

I chose the surgical abortion because it was a one day procedure with no follow up. If I took the medication abortion, I would need to have a follow up appointment after a week of taking the medication to make sure the pregnancy had ended. I would not be able to do that because I would be in training for deployment on an isolated base, so the only option was a surgical abortion. The environment in Planned Parenthood of Minnesota was compassionate. I had to have an escort meet me at my car because there were individuals protesting in front of the clinic. They shouted and screamed at me, but knew nothing about the circumstances of my life, the deeply personal decision I had to make, and in reality would have done nothing to support me if I had continued the pregnancy. The appointment was long as I would need another pregnancy test, an RH test, another ultrasound, and counseling with an RN. During the entire appointment, the women in the clinic would routinely check in with me, ask if this is what I wanted to continue. They shared that no matter what, this was my choice and they would support me in continuing the pregnancy or ending the pregnancy but wanted to support me either way. I was sitting on the exam table when my doctor entered the room, confirmed my personal information and shared that the procedure she would be performing would end my pregnancy. She asked me "Is this what you want?" I became emotional and we took a pause together, I shared that I never wanted to be pregnant, I never wanted to travel to Minnesota, I never wanted to jump through all the hoops to obtain an abortion, but I knew that I did not want this pregnancy and ultimately knew this was the right decision for my life.

When the procedure was complete I felt relief. Since knowing and finding out I was pregnant, I only felt dread. This was not the time or circumstances in my life where I wanted to continue a pregnancy. When asking the doctor for the note that shared I had an abortion she said something important to me, she shared that ultimately this was a medical decision and no one needed to know I had an abortion without my permission. It was common knowledge that women prior to deployment must take a pregnancy test, I asked for a letter to give to my military primary care provider that said I had received an abortion and may still test positive for pregnancy. If I tested positive prior to deployment without the doctor's note, they would have declined my orders to go to Afghanistan. She wrote a note that said my pregnancy had ended and that I could test positive for pregnancy, but I was not pregnant. At that moment, I had met my first advocate.

Because of a federal ban on abortion coverage I was unable to use TRICARE as my healthcare insurance and was unsure what I would do had there been any complications. Would I have been able to go to my own military primary care doctor? Would I have been in trouble for having this procedure? What would my commander say if the doctor reported this information to him and I had to miss duty? I did not have the answers to these questions and I still do not 10 years later. Regardless, the abortion was a safe procedure and I had zero complications, I returned to duty within 12 hours of having my procedure.

The procedure for an abortion was approximately 500 dollars, coupled with preparation in purchasing gear for deployment, needs for gas, and food for the 4 hour, 600 mile roundtrip journey to get the health care I needed. I had 16 dollars to my name the day I drove back to North Dakota and pay day was 1 week and a half away. I would fly into Afghanistan with almost no money to my name, but confident that the trajectory of my life was changed for the better because I was able to make the best decision for myself and for my life.

I was 22, and knew what now 33 year old me wanted out of life and her future. I was a trusted law enforcement officer, charged with defending my team and resources, taught federal use of force and lethal force. I am a decorated campaign veteran who was taught Geneva Conventions, NATO rules of engagement and trusted to be competent in my abilities enough to teach them to future Airmen. I was and am a competent human capable of making profound and important decisions that can impact the lives of other people. Yet, when making a decision over my own life I was not trusted to know what was best for myself. Several state laws had made that clear to me. Every step of the way there was a hurdle or a way I needed to protect myself. Everyone should have moved out of the way as I was the only person that would have to live with the consequences of any of my decisions. None of the commanders, supervisors, or protesters would have come to my aid when I left the military and went to college and struggled to find affordable housing, healthcare, or meaningful work. None of their lives changed when I made the best decision for myself and yet in many ways they were put in a position to forever change my life. The decision to continue or end a pregnancy is a healthcare decision that can not be made by one individual for another individual. These obstacles to access my own healthcare were laid in front of me, but they did not stop me. Nothing would have stopped me. Had I been denied leave, had I not had enough money, had my car broken down, had I been in a state with even more restrictive abortion laws, there is no doubt I would have taken matters into my own hands. I know in my heart what I would have done. No matter what, the pregnancy was going to end.

I can not reconcile that our government trusted me to hold weapons of protection for our country, serve as a respected member of our armed forces, at many times capable of affecting the lives of people in my chain of command, but did not trust me to make the right decision for my own body. I have no regrets about my decision to end my pregnancy. I was honorably discharged from the military and decorated after my tour of duty in Afghanistan. I received my education

and earned a degree in Public Health, traveled the world, met my partner, and now professionally support families making end of life decisions. I am proud of the life I have lived because of the decisions I made for myself at the age of 22. I urge you to pass the Women's Health Protection Act so that no one else has to face the barriers that I did.

Thank you.