

House Judiciary Committee

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Good morning and thank you to the House Judiciary Committee for inviting me to provide testimony today. My name is Aimee Arrambide, I am a We Testify Abortion Storyteller and the executive director of Avow where we strive for unrestricted abortion care and reproductive rights for all Texans through community-building, education, and political advocacy.

One in four people who are able to get pregnant will have an abortion in their lifetime. One in five people experience mental health issues in a given year. One in 25 Americans live with a serious mental health illness such as Bipolar Disorder. I live at the intersection of all three. Not only that, but I am a first generation Filipina American and second generation Mexican American and as a woman of color, abortion care is generally more difficult to access. I'm here to speak to on behalf of everyone whose abortion allowed them to care for their mental health and enabled them to thrive as a result. My story is not uncommon, but with the stigma surrounding both abortion and mental health disabilities, it is rarely discussed.

From my late teens into my mid twenties I suffered from undiagnosed bipolar disorder. When I was a teenager, it disguised itself as wide mood swings typical of most teenagers, except I had a blatant disregard for my well-being and made choices that could have resulted in serious consequences and harm to myself. But because I was a good student, a national merit semi-finalist, and hispanic finalist, active in sports and extracurricular activities, I hid it well. On the surface, I had my life together. Looking back, I am in awe that I made it out of my teenage years alive.

In college, it was harder to identify. For months at a time, I would be upbeat, highly energetic, racing, and hyper productive followed by periods of extreme depression. During the periods of hyperproductivity, I would take on a lot because I felt invincible. I aspired to do everything: I would sign up to take 21 hours of advanced level college credit. I worked full-time waiting tables. I had an active social life without needing sleep or rest. I was excelling in all aspects of my life.

Before I would even realize what was happening, I would be unable to get out of bed. It would start as one day just being too tired, and then a week would go by, before I knew months would pass where I would rarely leave my room, shower, eat, or care for my dog. It was too hard for me to withdraw from school despite being aware of the repercussions of failing all my classes. Just existing was too hard. I tried to self-medicate and attempted to end my life.

The school placed me on probation, and I did better the following semester because the mania and hyperproductivity started over again. But inevitably, within the next couple semesters my depressive state would start over again and I would fail out of school. This cycle repeated over and over again for years. I never sought help during the manic periods because I thought I had everything under control.

I found out I was 12 weeks pregnant when I was 25 years old. I had been with my boyfriend for a year. We barely discussed it. We agreed almost immediately that I would have an abortion. The year was 2003, before the myriad obstacles were enacted by the Texas Legislature. So, I was able to access care fairly easily despite the cost of around \$500, because we both had jobs, no one depending upon us, and my father. If this had happened anytime in the last 8 months after SB 8 the six week ban went into effect, I would have had to take off work, find child care for my two children, and travel out of state to access the care I needed. Or if this had happened in the last decade before SB8 went into effect, and I was able to get care in Texas, I would have encountered a 24-hour waiting period, a forced sonogram, and the legislatively mandated medically inaccurate “Women’s Right to Know” booklet and anti-abortion counseling.

I was empowered to make the decision to have an abortion because reproductive freedom was always part of our family’s values. My father was an abortion provider in central and south Texas from the 1970s to 1990s. He switched his specialty from anesthesiology to obstetrics and gynecology in the 1970s, and after witnessing the repercussions of unsafe abortions before legalization, he decided to provide abortions as well. When I first learned he provided abortions, in addition to delivering babies, a child in elementary school told me my father killed babies. When I confronted my parents, I’m not sure I understood. So he took me to a clinic in Laredo, where he provided abortion one day every two weeks, and I witnessed the gratitude on the faces of those waiting in the clinic.

As I grew older, I became aware why he wore a kevlar vest to work every day. I learned that the reason we lived in gated communities was because people threatened his life every day because of the abortion care he provided his patients. He provided abortions in the era when “Wanted: Dead Abortion Providers” posters appeared in communities where doctors lived. He was a provider when Dr. Gunn and Dr. Slepian were murdered. I also learned that adding malpractice insurance coverage for the four days a month he provided abortions in south Texas outside his normal practice in San Antonio was cost prohibitive, but he did it because he was the only provider in that part of the state and his patients depending on him. My dad was a hero.

In the year following my abortion, my father was diagnosed with a glioblastoma brain tumor. As I spent more time with him, and as he spiraled into depression, we both realized that I was not well. I concluded that in order to help him get through this ordeal, I needed to get help. I sought out treatment. I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. I spent the next couple years trying different treatments. One medication resulted in grinding my teeth all night long, another made me gain 40 lbs and lethargic. When I finally found the medication that worked, I was a whole new person.

Treating my bipolar disorder enabled me to take care of my father after his brain surgery resulted in a stroke. I was mentally healthy for the first time in my adult life and could be a full partner to my boyfriend, who is now my husband of 16 years. Before my father died, which was two months after my wedding, I promised him I would fulfill my dream and his dream for me and go to law school. I went back to college and was able to thrive. I moved to New York with my husband and attended law school. During law school, when I was ready, healthy, and thriving, I had two children. My pregnancies were physically and mentally very difficult. And after being a parent for the past eleven years, I have no doubt that if I hadn't had an abortion when I did, I would not have survived. My chosen pregnancies were not easy, but they were exactly that: chosen. My children are my whole world.

A few years ago, I moved back to my home of Texas and have thrived. None of this would have been possible without my abortion.

My abortion saved my life.

On average, around 60,000 Texans access abortion care a year. As a result of increasing restrictions passed each legislative session, it has become progressively more difficult to access that care. In 2011 when the 24-hour waiting period and mandated sonogram passed, the Texas legislature also passed a family planning funding ban, an affiliate ban, and a local funding ban. In 2013, the legislature passed HB 2, the omnibus bill which required hospital admitting privileges for providers, mandated ambulatory surgical center for abortion procedures, and other restrictions, this resulted initially in the closing of 33 abortion clinics, leaving eight for the whole state of Texas. While some of the restrictions in HB 2 were found unconstitutional, the network was already decimated.

In 2019, Texas was home to 7 million people of reproductive age who can get pregnant and over 26 abortion restrictions. It was then, after my husband's vasectomy, I became pregnant for a fourth time and had my second abortion. I had a medication abortion, a series of two safe and simple medications, but was subject to all the restrictions in place at the time; a mandatory ultrasound; a 24 hour waiting period; the government mandated lies and medical misinformation my provider was required to tell

me. While the abortion was safe and straightforward, the hurdles I had to go through were exponentially more difficult—and that's still with all of the privileges and resources I had at my disposal.

In September 2021, when SB 8 went into effect, the chilling effect was immediate. People were confused about whether abortion was legal, afraid to ask their friends and family for help, and unsure if they could call abortion clinics or funds because they were afraid of being sued for putting their communities at risk. Clinics that were providing abortions were overwhelmed. The four neighboring states combined have less than half the clinics of Texas, and while they are able to accommodate some of the needs of Texans, the wait for care increased, because they still have to care for their own communities. As a result of the exponential increase in clients, abortion funds run out of funding earlier each month and inevitably Texans have been forced to manage their own abortion or carry their pregnancy to term against their wishes.

And if the Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, the trigger ban that the Texas Legislature passed last summer would go into effect thirty days later, banning abortion completely without exceptions for rape, incest, or the mental health of the pregnant person.

One in four people who can get pregnant will have an abortion in their life time. That includes people you love, your friends and family. And some may even have a story like mine. I am thankful for my abortion. My abortion saved my life, enabled the family I have now, and allowed me to thrive.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story with you today.