

WASHINGTON- Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (NY-28) and U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) today announced that they have introduced legislation that would provide America's women in uniform with the same rights to reproductive choice as most other employees of the federal government.

Currently, the health coverage provided to servicewomen fails to cover abortion, even in the case of rape or incest, which is unlike most other women receiving health care from the federal government including Medicare recipients, federal employees not in the military and women receiving care through the Indian Health Services, all of whom can receive abortions in the case of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother.

Today, Slaughter and Gillibrand announced the MARCH for Military Women Act (Military Access to Reproductive Care and Health) which would lift the statutory ban that denies U.S. servicewomen coverage for abortion care in cases of rape or incest and prevents women in the military from using private funds to access abortion services at U.S. military facilities.

"As our servicewomen risk their lives defending our country, it is deeply unfair that they are denied the rights of the Constitution that they defend," said Congresswoman Slaughter. "Imagine being a victim of rape on a United States military base overseas being denied the abortion coverage, and then having to turn to a potentially unsafe local facility. It's preposterous and incredibly unjust to the women who serve our country so proudly each day."

"It is an outrage that the women in our military do not have the same basic protections for reproductive health care as women across the U.S." said Senator Gillibrand. "We must put an end to this egregious injustice and allow our women in uniform to exercise their right to reproductive health care."

Currently, servicewomen are not allowed to pay for abortion services with their own funds in military medical facilities. They were afforded this right until 1988, when the Department of Defense rescinded it. Women serving overseas are perhaps most affected by this policy, as they may be forced to rely on unsafe local facilities. Failing that, a servicewoman would need to request permission from her supervisor to leave her combat mission and return to the United States or another country where abortion care is available.

More on the legislation and the coalition of support it has received is included below.

The Problem

Department of Defense statistics show that 3,158 sexual assaults were reported in the military

in fiscal year 2010. While shocking, that statistic only reflects a fraction of the sexual assaults, due to under-reporting in the military. Indeed, the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services report estimated that as many as 90 percent of sexual assaults go unreported. After a woman is assaulted, she should not have to fight to receive medical services such as an abortion.

Every woman should have access to comprehensive health care coverage. At the very least, women in the military should not receive lesser care than other women with government insurance. And yet, today, that is true. Most other women with government insurance – including Medicare recipients, federal employees (other than soldiers), and women receiving care through the Indian Health Services – are provided with coverage for abortion in the case of rape or incest. Women in the military, however, are shown lesser regard.

The Legislation

The MARCH for Military Women Act (Military Access to Reproductive Care and Health), H.R. 2085, will

Lift the statutory ban that denies U.S. servicewomen coverage for abortion care in cases of rape or incest

Lift the statutory ban that prevents women in the military from using private funds to access abortion services at U.S. military facilities.

The Coalition of Support

Service Women's Action Network

“Service Women’s Action Network is proud to fully support the MARCH for Military Women Act, Military Access to Reproductive Care and Health introduced by Senator Gillibrand and Rep. Slaughter. This legislation would not only restore abortion coverage to our military women who are survivors of rape and incest, but it would also bring the Department of Defense in line with the policy that governs other federal programs,” said Bhagwati. “The current policy, which discriminates against American women who volunteer to serve in our nation’s Armed Forces, is unjust, cruel and unfair. In the face of alarmingly high rates of sexual assault in the military, it is unconscionable. Congress must take immediate steps to repeal the current policy -- a policy that only compounds the harm that servicewomen experience by denying them safe access to the full range of reproductive health care.”

-Anu Bhagwati, Executive Director, Service Women’s Action Network

National Abortion Federation

“The current ban jeopardizes the lives and health of servicewomen and their dependents around the world who must rely on military hospitals for their health care. Women in the military put their lives on the line for our country, and they deserve the same access to safe, legal abortion care as their civilian counterparts.

“NAF has heard from women who have been raped while serving our country, and it is despicable that many of them who do not have adequate resources have to put their lives, health, and military careers at risk in order to access the abortion care they need.”

-Sharon Levin, Vice President and General Counsel, National Abortion Federation

American Civil Liberties Union

“Our servicewomen are an integral part of our armed forces and serve valiantly as the United States fights wars on two fronts, yet they are prevented from exercising their own reproductive freedom. They put their lives on the line, but we deny them insurance coverage even where they seek an abortion because of rape. The MARCH for Military Women Act is a vital piece of legislation which would take a huge step forward toward restoring U.S. servicewomen’s equal access to reproductive health care and basic human dignity. We applaud Rep. Slaughter for her leadership in bringing much-needed attention to this important issue.”

-Laura W. Murphy, Director, American Civil Liberties Union Washington Legislative Office

Organizations that endorsed this legislation include:

Service Women’s Action Network, American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, National Abortion Federation, American Civil Liberties Union, NARAL Pro-Choice America, National Partnership for Women & Families, Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health, The Reproductive Health Technologies Project, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, National Women’s Law Center.

In the House, H.R. 2085 has 40 cosponsors.

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