

November 2011

Hon. George Webster
Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Premier
District 19 - Borden - Kinkora
Fifth Floor, Jones Building
11 Kent Street,
P.O. Box 2000,
Charlottetown, PEI
C1A 7N8

Dear Minister Webster:

As you know, the issue of abortion access in Prince Edward Island has lately been a topic of considerable public discussion and media coverage. I write to you today to register my strong endorsement of providing access to abortion services on Prince Edward Island.

Health Minister Doug Currie has indicated that your government's failure to honour its responsibility toward the women of this province is merely a cost-saving strategy. Are you prepared to align yourself with a position that deems the health of women an appropriate site for trimming a budget?

Putting aside, for the moment, the dubious ethics of using cost as a justification for refusing to provide women with local access to a primary health care service, I wish to draw your attention to the Minister's indication to *The Guardian* that "he wants to hear from both sides on whether abortion services should be available on P.E.I." Surely, if the matter is budgetary and not political, such an invitation to hear "both sides" would be unnecessary. Would Minister Currie express a similar desire to hear from "both sides" on the issue of whether any other legal medical procedure "should be available" in our province? Moreover, your government is perfectly aware of the following: 1) the province *already* funds off-Island abortion procedures; 2) PEI used to offer local abortion procedures, and still performs very similar procedures, and so the issue is not one of unavailable medical equipment; 3) abortion is a safe, quick, common, and inexpensive medical procedure; 4) the decision to eliminate the service was a political one that followed swiftly on the heels of the contentious *R. v. Morgentaler* ruling in 1988. When we combine these numerous matters of public knowledge, Minister Currie's defense of the status quo becomes untenable. It is not the truth.

Clearly, the issue is not money. The issue is politics. Your government would prefer to shirk its responsibility toward women than to risk a backlash from a vocal minority who would seek to strip women of their bodily autonomy and security of the person. Your government may not continue to do this.

Your government's failure to value the interests of women is, as always, an omission that most powerfully victimizes those of us who are the most vulnerable. Low-income women cannot easily, or at all, make a trip to Halifax to undergo an abortion, and they certainly cannot afford

to go to the private clinic in Fredericton. Likewise, teenage girls face additional challenges in conveying themselves to another province to undergo a medical procedure that, in many instances, they need to keep private due to the attached stigma. For women who have disabilities or conditions that complicate travel, the necessity of going off-Island is still more burdensome. Low-income women and youth cannot easily, or at all, secure the time to obtain the two doctor referrals necessary before even attempting to schedule a trip out of province. The implications of these difficulties become even more serious when we consider that there is a relatively small window of time during which an abortion can be safely performed. These obstacles, which your government is content to keep in place between Island women and a basic medical procedure, are both arbitrary and prohibitive. In fact, they are at times impossible hurdles.

They are also in contravention of federal law. In addition to provisions in the Canada Health Act that ensure equitable access to healthcare for all Canadians, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that “[f]orcing a woman, by threat of criminal sanction, to carry a fetus to term unless she meets certain criteria unrelated to her own priorities and aspirations, is a profound interference with a woman's body and thus a violation of her security of the person.” Not only, then, is your government failing in its duty to provide for women’s basic healthcare needs in a manner that is readily accessible to every woman regardless of her social or economic position; you are also failing to protect what the Supreme Court has ruled to be a constitutional right.

This inaction by the government is not innocuous. You cannot pretend that the obstacles in the way of access to abortions are not real impediments; they are, and they are not legal. Your government needs to remove them immediately. You need to ensure that access to abortions is available on Prince Edward Island. It is your ethical, legal, and constitutional responsibility, and I call upon you to see that your government upholds it.

Sincerely,

Print Name

Address

Signature

City, Postal Code