

Senate State of Abortion Rights Briefing
January 17, 2024

Statement of Dr. Austin Dennard

Good morning; my name is Austin Dennard. I'm a mother of three, an OBGYN and a 6th generation Texan. I'm here today to speak about my own lived experience with abortion bans in my home state and the chaos, harm and heartbreak these bans have caused to my patients, to my profession and to me, personally.

Like for many people, my journey to motherhood has not been straightforward. I have three healthy children, but I have also experienced three pregnancy losses. One of my losses ended in miscarriage while the other two ended in abortion following devastating yet different fetal diagnoses.

The first time I needed an abortion was in 2019. My husband and I were newlyweds and I was finishing my final year of residency training in Obstetrics and Gynecology. It was our first pregnancy and we were thrilled, until we received terrible news. A rare genetic disorder. A horrible diagnosis. My pregnancy immediately became high risk. I'll never forget the tight hug my Maternal Fetal Medicine specialist gave me after our ultrasound. Together, we cried. Then, she openly discussed my options for care. She was not afraid to tell me that I needed an abortion.

My husband and I drove home that day absolutely heartbroken while my doctor began arranging care with a medical team she knew and trusted. Despite my grief, I felt safe and supported. Less than a week later, I received an uncomplicated abortion from a highly skilled physician 10 miles away from my home. My recovery was expedited by loving and supportive colleagues, family and friends.

Then fast forward to the summer of 2022. Roe had fallen and everything had changed. My husband and I now had two young children; a girl and boy just 20 months apart in age. We were hoping for a third. I had recently experienced a miscarriage but was thrilled to be pregnant again, for the 5th time. But at a routine ultrasound visit, I received devastating news. The brain and skull had not formed. It was anencephaly – the most severe neural tube diagnosis. It was relatively rare but fatal. This pregnancy was not going to become a brother or sister for my children. I remember looking up at the ultrasound screen in disbelief. *I can't believe I need another abortion. And we have to flee the state.* My state. 6th generation. Where I practice medicine. Where I'm raising my family. My doctor gave me a hug. "I'm so sorry Austin" was all she was able to say.

My home state has stripped me of my own reproductive rights while simultaneously disassembling the most important foundation of a doctor-patient relationship: trust and open, honest communication. My mind began to spin: *Where would I go? Who would*

take care of me? Who will take care of my children while I'm gone? What about my patients? What if this is the last time I ever get to be pregnant? Because of Texas's new laws, we were afraid to use credit cards or to tell people why we were traveling to the East Coast so suddenly, for fear that our ability to practice medicine would be compromised. It was absolutely humiliating. I felt physically and emotionally broken.

As an OB GYN, I know firsthand that everyone's reason for needing an abortion is valid and personal. Even planned, prayed-for pregnancies can end in abortion. As a provider, I have seen abortions save lives. For me, the physical and emotional risk of carrying a pregnancy to term, one that had no chance of survival was something I could not fathom. But since the fall of Roe, abortion laws written by politicians (not doctors) had made the decision for me. So long as I remained on Texas soil, I was to remain pregnant. Forced pregnancy. Forced to delivery. Forced to watch him die; either in my womb or in my arms. This is the current state of Texas.

I have felt marginalized and silenced by these laws; that is why I'm speaking out: not only for myself, but for my young daughter and for all my patients. We no longer have basic human rights for freedom and self determination that my mother and her generation relied on for nearly 50 years. The state of Texas should not be making these decisions for me – or for anyone else.

Nothing brings me more joy than raising my children – now 4, 3 and 5 months, with my adoring and supportive husband. But a close second is being an obgyn. I get to be there for so many change-your-life-forever types of moments. *“Congratulations, you're pregnant.” “It's twins!” “It's a little girl/boy”* There's nothing quite like the moment when a baby is born and a family is created.

But with that also come the difficult moments – ones of heartbreak – pregnancy loss, devastating diagnoses, and infertility. Since Roe fell, those tough moments have become even more tragic, adding enormous fear onto all of the sadness including new and painful questions I routinely face as a Texas provider: *How can I help them? Where can we get her care? How do I keep her safe while traveling in the midst of a medical emergency?*

These bans have stolen so much from all of us. The joy is now lost.

So now, when I deliver a baby and lay them on my patient's chest, I breathe a sigh of relief that the three of us have somehow beat the odds. In spite of everything our state has thrown in front of us, we brought that baby into the world safely into their parents' arms.