



Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence
ACTION ALLIANCE

Values Messaging: **Reproductive Freedom & Choice** for Sexual & Domestic Violence Survivors

On Friday June 24th, 2022, the [Supreme Court of the United States voted to overturn Roe v. Wade and Casey v. Planned Parenthood](#). This decision destroys the right to abortion in the United States. With this ruling, the Supreme Court is allowing Mississippi to enforce a harmful 15-week ban on abortion and is opening the door for all state legislatures to choose to further restrict or even ban abortion. The decision also leaves open the possibility that other fundamental rights, including the right to birth control, could also be at risk.

This resource is intended to guide you - sexual and domestic violence survivor advocates and allies - in using values-based messaging to communicate the very real and immediate threat that this decision poses to survivor freedom and choice, including the ways in which we can mobilize our families, friends, and communities to act to safeguard our basic freedoms and democracy. This document includes a Question/Answer section explaining how abortion bans traumatize and harm survivors + Case Interpretation Messaging + Values/Harms Messaging + Sharing Calls to Action.

Is abortion still legal in Virginia?

YES! Abortion access is still legal and safe in Virginia....for now. While Virginia has no “trigger law” (meaning that abortion rights cannot immediately be restricted by the Supreme Court decision), this could always change during the next General Assembly Session. In fact, attempts to restrict abortion access occur annually in the General Assembly. And Governor Youngkin has already attempted to further restrict access through the state budget process. Thankfully, this was defeated. But the threat to abortion access in Virginia is very real and will happen if more anti-choice legislators are voted into the General Assembly in 2023. We must act now to protect choice and freedom for all.

Why is reproductive freedom and choice critical for survivors of sexual and domestic violence?

Survivors of sexual and domestic violence can and do become pregnant because of the violence that they experience. [According to the most recent National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey](#), 14.9% of rape victims became pregnant¹. What’s more is that approximately 1 in 5 women report having experienced forced pregnancy or pregnancy coercion and 1 in 7 women have had their abusers

¹ Basile, K.C., Smith, S.G., Kresnow, M., Khatiwada S., & Leemis, R.W. (2022). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Report on Sexual Violence*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs/nisvsreportonsexualviolence.pdf>

actively interfere with their birth control². Sexual and domestic violence survivors not only have significantly higher rates of unintended pregnancies, but they also experience escalating and far more lethal violence during pregnancy. Therefore, access to methods of stealth contraception (like implants, IUDs, etc.) as well as access to safe and legal abortion, are critical to a survivor's safety, health, and freedom. Moreover, allowing survivors to make informed decisions regarding their body and their care is an empowering step toward recovery.

What would it mean for sexual and domestic violence survivors if abortion becomes banned or criminalized in Virginia?

Banning freedom and choice for sexual and domestic violence survivors in Virginia would:

- ☒ **Subject survivors to coercive laws that mimic the violence used by their abusers and force them to carry pregnancies to term** – even though it may be a pregnancy resulting from rape, abuse, coercion, or birth control sabotage.
- ☒ **Destroy survivor freedom, choice, and bodily autonomy** by creating environments in which trauma-informed and healing-centered care is inaccessible to survivors.
- ☒ **Increase rates of maternal mortality and preventable death**, particularly for Black, Brown, and Indigenous Virginians who become pregnant.
- ☒ **Subject survivors to greater criminalization** because of their attempts to seek reproductive healthcare and/or support to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in the aftermath of trauma. This burden will fall most heavily on survivors who are Black, Brown, and Indigenous.
- ☒ **Subject survivors, and any Virginian who becomes pregnant, to incredibly traumatizing and high-risk birthing events.** For example, an individual carrying an unviable pregnancy (that would result in stillbirth or fetal death) could be told by their physician *“abortion is not an option. You must wait to experience an incredibly painful and traumatic bleed-out that may result in further life-threatening complications”*.

What would it mean for sexual and domestic violence survivors if birth control and contraception become banned or criminalized in Virginia?

Banning access to birth control and other methods of preventing unwanted pregnancy for sexual and domestic violence survivors would:

- ☒ **Increase rates of unplanned pregnancy and death.** Pregnancy is used by abusers as a tool to further trap, isolate, and harm their victims. Pregnancy is also the most lethal and dangerous time for a survivor who is trapped in an abusive relationship. Decreasing access to birth control means increasing pregnancy which therefore means increases lethality for survivors.
- ☒ **Destroy survivor freedom, choice, and bodily autonomy** by increasing the likelihood that a survivor would become pregnant unintentionally and/or by force at the hands of their abuser.

² Futures Without Violence. (n.d.) *The facts on reproductive health and partner abuse.*

http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Reproductive.pdf

Case Interpretation Messaging: What this Decision Means in VA

- The Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade* and destroyed the right to abortion in the United States. With this ruling, the Supreme Court is allowing Mississippi to enforce its harmful 15-week ban on abortion and is opening the door for state legislatures to choose to further restrict and ban abortion. This decision is an unconscionable rollback of fundamental rights for all people in the United States. Furthermore, the decision signals a possible retreat from the Supreme Court's constitutional duty to protect fundamental rights. Justice Thomas' concurrence even goes so far as to suggest that a whole body of rights should now be up for reconsideration. These rights include protections for birth control, marriage equality, and same-sex sexual activity.
- **Abortion is still legal in Virginia...for now.** While Virginia has no "trigger law" (meaning that abortion rights will not be immediately restricted), this could always change during the next General Assembly Session. In fact, attempts to restrict abortion access occur annually in the General Assembly. Governor Youngkin has already attempted to further restrict abortion rights in Virginia and recently announced that he will push for a ban on most abortion after 15 weeks. As such, **the threat to abortion access in Virginia is very real**, particularly if more anti-choice legislators are voted into the General Assembly in 2023.

Values/Harms Messaging: Why this Decision Matters

- ✓ All people, regardless of where we live or what we look like, deserve to be able to make the best healthcare choices for ourselves and our families. The decision of when and if to become a parent is one of the most important many of us will make in life.
 - For decades, far-right groups and politicians have demonized people who seek abortion care, eliminated access to healthcare providers, and restricted and banned reproductive freedom, even as they attack access to contraception, sex education, and policies that help parents and children.
 - We make the future, and together we can ensure that all of us, no matter who we are or where we come from, can decide if, when, and how to grow our families.³
- ✓ Sexual and domestic violence are about power and control. At its core, these acts of violence involve one person using another person's body to meet their needs. Because its goal is to force one person's will over another's body, the restriction of access to abortion is itself a form of violence.
- ✓ Acts of violence attempt to remove power and agency from individuals. As a result, the ability to make informed decisions regarding medical care, including abortion, is essential for a survivor's recovery and healing.

³ From: *We Make the Future Messaging Guide* (n.d.): <https://www.wemakethefutureaction.us/resources-documents/we-make-the-future-messaging-guide>

- ✓ Abortion bans and restrictions fall hardest on those from historically marginalized and oppressed communities. Factors like age, gender identity, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and income often determine an individual's level of access to quality health information and services, in turn creating disproportionate and negative health outcomes for many survivors who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color.
- ✓ Rape and incest exceptions are impractical and serve to remove agency and control from a survivor, who would be forced to report their assault in order to access this exception. No one should have to endure violence to be considered worthy of bodily autonomy and freedom. We should not have to earn our freedom by being violated.
- ✓ No matter our race, gender, or zip code, most of us believe that we should decide for ourselves whether and when to have children.
 - But today, a handful of politicians pass laws that destroy our freedoms, undermine our rights, and endanger our futures. They make decisions that force us to struggle to simply make ends meet or to care for our families, and then shame and blame us for the hardships they create. And while we're busy fighting for our most basic rights, they hand the money they take from our healthcare, our schools and our kids' futures to their corporate donors.
 - By going all in to [name desired action: see calls to action below], we can ensure that any of us can get the care that we need no matter how much money we have or which state we call home.⁴

Now What? Sharing A Call to Action

- ✓ Make sure that survivors, advocates, allies, and community members know that **right now in Virginia you can safely and legally access an abortion today.**
- ✓ **Register survivors, staff, advocates, board members, and community members to vote!** You can use the [Building Thriving Communities Toolkit and Campaign](#) materials to engage people in discussions about shared values and ensure that we vote for a world in which we all are safe and equal, and have access to voice and choice.
- ✓ **Contact your elected representatives in the Virginia General Assembly** and let them know that survivor healing must include access to reproductive healthcare, including abortion, in the aftermath of trauma. This is central to survivor freedom and choice.
- ✓ **Attend the Action Alliance's annual [Legislative Advocacy Day](#) in January.** Join advocates and survivors statewide to amplify survivor voices and ask that our elected representatives support healing-centered and life-saving access to healthcare, including abortion.

⁴ From: *We Make the Future Messaging Guide* (n.d.): <https://www.wemakethefutureaction.us/resources-documents/we-make-the-future-messaging-guide>

- ✓ Congress must act swiftly to protect every person’s right to make their own healthcare decisions and to maintain freedom over their bodies. **Support the passage of the [Women’s Health Protection Act](#)** and stay committed to working towards racial, economic, and reproductive justice for all.
- ✓ **Work locally to ensure that your agency is well connected to reproductive healthcare partners who can work with survivors** who have experienced reproductive and sexual coercion and trauma. Use the Action Alliance’s [Reproductive and Sexual Coercion Toolkit](#) to facilitate these efforts.
- ✓ **Share and even create your own position statements on the intersections of survivor freedom and reproductive healthcare access.** Use the Action Alliance’s [Promoting Reproductive and Sexual Health Policy Position](#) as a guide.
- ✓ **Know where to find your local or regional abortion fund.** These funds fill critical gaps for those seeking abortion and reproductive healthcare – from funding medical procedures and travel costs to coordinating with healthcare providers and working with community leaders to navigate complex legal and medical systems on behalf of those who need them most.
- ✓ **Understand - and educate those around you about - the dangers of so-called “crisis pregnancy centers” or fake “women’s health centers” in Virginia.** [These centers](#) are unregulated, do not employ physicians or trained licensed medical professionals, and use shame and stigma to coerce people into carrying unwanted pregnancies to term.



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