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U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform Hearing:
“A State of Crisis: Examining the Urgent Need to Protect and Expand Abortion Rights
and Access”

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Written Testimony

Good Morning Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the committee. I submit this testimony for the record on behalf of myself and the clients I serve at the Texas Equal Access Fund. Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today about the catastrophic impact of S.B. 8 and the pain and suffering that it inflicts upon pregnant people in Texas.

My name is Maleeha Aziz, and I stand before you today as a survivor of sexual assault, a proud abortion storyteller with We Testify, and a heartbroken Community Organizer for the Texas Equal Access Fund. We are an abortion fund that provides emotional and financial support to people who are seeking abortion care. S.B. 8 officially became the law in Texas at midnight on September 1, 2021, and then everything took a turn for the worse. Given the absurdity of this law, no amount of planning and strategizing could have prepared us for what was to come.

S.B. 8 bans abortions after six weeks gestation and allows private citizens to sue anyone helping a patient access care after that time frame. It is essentially a total ban on all abortions because most people (myself included) are unaware of their pregnancy at that stage. S.B. 8 also encourages bounty hunting and vigilantism, which is terrifying and comparable to state-sanctioned violence. Anyone hoping to make \$10,000 by hook or crook will now bring about frivolous lawsuits against abortion providers, office and clinic staff, abortion fund workers, volunteers, Uber/Lyft drivers, doulas, and even friends, family members of patients trying to access healthcare.

Texas legislators are making a mockery of the legal system by using a carefully masterminded scheme in an attempt to thwart lawsuits against the state. They actively traumatize pregnant people by forcing them to jump through numerous hoops and navigate medically unnecessary obstacles. S.B. 8 is forcing those of us who believe in bodily autonomy, choice, and freedom to spend valuable time and resources fighting these ridiculous lawsuits instead of helping those who need abortion care. Even before S.B. 8, getting an abortion in Texas was a logistical nightmare, and now with additional barriers in place, it is nearly impossible.

The authors of S.B. 8 and the people supporting this discriminatory and despicable law have made it abundantly clear that they do not care about pregnant people's physical and emotional well-being. They are only interested in controlling the bodies of pregnant people. Why else would this law, unlike others, not make an exception for rape and incest survivors? As an abortion fund worker, I am sad and heartbroken. As a survivor, I am full of rage.

You see, I know too well what it is like to have your body violated, and your power stripped away from you. I remember feeling helpless and disgusted by my own body for a long time. Sometimes I still do because recovery and healing is not a two-step process but an ongoing journey. I got lucky that my rapist did not get me pregnant and that I was not forced into carrying and delivering my rapist's child. I promise you that would have broken me beyond repair, and I would not be sitting here before you today. I am angry that survivors like me are feeling compelled to publicly share our deepest darkest traumas to help legislators realize the depravity of this law and how disempowering it is. It strips away a survivor's chance to heal and subjects

them to forced pregnancy and birth, which will serve as a constant reminder of their trauma and powerlessness.

It is also essential to understand that all abortions are valid irrespective of extenuating circumstances. Not wanting to be a parent is reason enough to have an abortion. People should not have to go through life-altering tragedies to be considered worthy of bodily autonomy. Every human being should be able to make decisions about their own body. Healthcare is a human right that we all deserve, and abortion is healthcare.

Furthermore, S.B. 8 is a discriminatory law that disproportionately blocks access for and harms low-income and minority communities. Due to the ban in Texas, people are being forced to travel to other states to access abortion care. For the wealthy, this may not be a significant barrier because they have the means to travel and pay for the additional expenses associated with it. However, for most of our clients at TEA Fund, these added barriers make it very difficult for people to access care. Most of the clients that we serve are low-income people of color. More than half of our clients are already parents trying their best to provide for their children. I fear for their safety, well-being, and lives because I worry that they may act in desperation due to the lack of access and utilize an unsafe alternative.

Since S.B. 8 has been in effect, several clients have expressed fear and anxiety over being forced to remain pregnant against their will. Over 80% of our clients have expressed learning about their pregnancy after eight weeks gestation, two weeks beyond the limit of the ban imposed by S.B. 8. The majority of them have to go out-of-state for the healthcare that they need. Unfortunately, despite the increase in funding from us, many clients are still unable to afford the additional costs associated with traveling out-of-state for an abortion. Texas does not guarantee paid sick leave, and for our clients living paycheck to paycheck, the loss of wages incurred from missing work is not an option. Some of our clients are afraid of losing their jobs if they are denied the time off. Suppose our clients somehow pull together the money to travel out-of-state and have their abortion. In that case, they fall behind on other essentials such as rent, groceries, and utilities, further deteriorating their quality of life.

Minors face even more challenges because they need parental consent or a judicial bypass to have an abortion. Without fully understanding a pregnant person's situation or circumstances, lawmakers have imposed laws that imply that young people do not know how to make decisions for themselves, stripping them of dignity and bodily autonomy. If someone is old enough to get pregnant, they can decide what to do with that pregnancy. Hypothetically, even if they found out about their pregnancy before six weeks, which is highly unlikely, they will be over the six-week limit by the time they navigate the judicial bypass process. Surely, you can imagine why it would be harder for a minor to travel to another state to have an abortion.

For the parents that we serve, childcare is an added barrier to abortion access. Childcare is costly, and making travel arrangements for other children when you can barely make ends meet is not practical or realistic. I remember an incident that I encountered while on a clinic escort shift before the implementation of S.B. 8. A lady in the parking lot had been in her car for a very

long time. I thought maybe she was intimidated by the protestors because they yelled vile things, so I knocked on her window to ask if she wanted me to walk her inside. When she rolled down her window, I saw that she had an infant in the car with her. She told me she was waiting on her babysitter to care for her child so she could go in for her procedure. I am glad that this lady was able to afford childcare and have her abortion. However, this is not the case for the vast majority of our clients due to financial constraints. Having to travel out-of-state only makes logistics more complicated.

I can relate to the struggle of having to travel out-of-state to access abortion care. Nearly eight years ago, I found myself dealing with an unwanted pregnancy despite using contraception. I was a recent immigrant to the U.S. from Pakistan and was navigating a new country, culture, and legal system, none of which were easy. After the initial phase of denial, when I had finally accepted that I was indeed pregnant, I reached out to a family member who was a medical student at the time to ask for help with resources on obtaining an abortion. The next step was to figure out how pregnant I was, which meant I needed a sonogram. I had insurance and called my OB's office, and they asked me for the date of my last menstrual period. I did not track my cycle, and therefore I had no idea, so I gave them my best guess. It put me under eight weeks, and they told me they would not see me until I hit the eight-week mark. I was a college student, so I did not have much money left after covering basic expenses and needed to look for another place to obtain a low-cost or free ultrasound.

My family member sent me a list of clinics offering free sonograms, so I picked one and decided to go there. At the time, I had no idea, and I am sure that my family member did not know either that she was sending me to a crisis pregnancy center. Crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) are fake clinics that lie and manipulate people into staying pregnant against their will. Two ladies wearing white lab coats imitating medical professionals tested my urine to confirm my pregnancy. They made me sit in a room and watch a propaganda video against abortion. A man on-screen imitating a doctor held surgical instruments and dissected a human child, describing it as an abortion procedure. The CPC had biblical imagery, and I figured that they would not be assisting me with an abortion. I decided to go through the motions, get my sonogram and get out of there.

I had a fair amount of anxiety around the ultrasound due to a medical condition called vaginismus that I developed due to my sexual trauma. It makes any kind of penetration very difficult, including sexual intercourse, pelvic exams, and pap smears. I was hoping the ultrasound was abdominal and shared my fear of transvaginal ultrasounds with the sonographer. She responded by saying, "you should learn to deal with pain because you are pregnant now." Not only were the staff not licensed medical professionals, but clearly, they were not trauma-informed either. Thankfully it was an abdominal ultrasound, and they put me at nine weeks gestation. CPC staff also told me that abortion causes cancer, infertility, and depression. I know abortions are one of the safest medical procedures out there. However, due to the vaginismus, the only option for me was a medication abortion due to its less invasive nature. One of the CPC ladies told me that the abortion pill is so dangerous that Texas had banned it. That is when I went into panic mode, and I wish I had not believed their lies.

When I came to terms with the fact that I could not have a medication abortion in Texas due to being misinformed by CPC staff, I was not ok. I decided to share my pregnancy with another family member because I needed help physically, emotionally, and financially. I am blessed with a wonderful family and a strong support system because they came through for me when I needed them the most. My close friends and family came to Texas on the next available flight and started researching out-of-state clinics with me. I remember calling Louisiana because it was within driving distance and would be cheaper. However, I was extremely sick due to the pregnancy, and my family member suggested that I take a shorter flight instead. I let her know that it was not something I could afford, and that is when she stepped in and covered the cost of my abortion and all of the other travel-related expenses. My partner and I took the next flight to Colorado Springs, where I would have my abortion at Planned Parenthood.

I would like to put the out-of-state travel costs associated with an abortion procedure in perspective for you. Abortion in the first trimester costs between \$400-\$700. Second-trimester abortions cost between \$700-\$3000, and abortions in the third-trimester range between \$3000 and up to \$10,000. Due to the Hyde Amendment and Texas' ban on private insurance coverage of abortion, insurance can not help with these costs. At TEA Fund, we have increased our funding for all our clients. Before S.B. 8, we would fund a first-trimester abortion at \$300, and with S.B. 8 in effect, we now fund up to \$700. For second-trimester abortions, we used to fund up to \$400, and now we fund up to \$850. For a third-trimester abortion, we used to fund up to \$500, and now we fund \$1000. Even though we have doubled our funding, abortion is still out of reach for many of our clients because our limited capacity to provide does not even fully cover the costly procedure.

As someone who has traveled out of the state for abortion care, I want to shed light on the physical, financial, and emotional toll it takes.

The financial costs associated with my experience are as follows:

- Procedure (Medication): \$680
- Flight to Colorado Springs: \$384 (my partner and I)
- Zofran and Pain meds: \$40-\$60
- Rhogam Shot: \$120 (negative blood type)
- Hotel for one night: \$180
- Uber/Lyft: \$150 (rental under 25 is nearly impossible)

Total: Nearly \$2000

While walking into the clinic, protestors called me a murderer and yelled horrible insults at me. I remember being unable to fight back the tears as I did not have the confidence back then at 20 years old that I do now. I remember having to undergo a mandatory but medically unnecessary transvaginal ultrasound. It was very triggering and felt like sexual retraumatization. It was excruciatingly painful and nearly impossible to get through due to my vaginismus. I was told I had to wait a day due to the mandatory 24-hour wait period and came back the next day for my procedure.

The next day was better, and I am eternally grateful to the kind and compassionate abortion provider who helped ease my anxiety and told me that I was the only one who knew what was best for my body, and that is all that mattered. He handed me the mifepristone pill and watched me swallow it. He sent me back to Texas with misoprostol pills and pain medication. I was instructed to put the drugs between my cheeks and swallow the residue about thirty minutes later. I did just that, and it took my body seven painful hours to expel the pregnancy. I was surrounded by family and friends, my cat, and used the Vampire Diaries to distract from the pain. When it was over, I felt relieved, and I was so tired I just crashed and woke up the next day. My friends and family stayed with me for a few days, cooked meals, bought me some comfort snacks, a heating pad, and sanitary napkins. I had a very understanding boss who knew why I took time off. I was given unpaid time off, which was doable for me thanks to the help of my family member.

Despite the hoops I had to jump through and the trauma I experienced at the hands of anti-choice extremists, I consider myself lucky because at least I was able to have an abortion. Unfortunately, this is not the case for most people under S.B. 8. Legislators can increase barriers and ban abortion, but that does not eliminate the need for an abortion. When I think back to the anguish, dread, fear, and anxiety I felt when I thought I would not have access to abortion, my heart aches for all the people living that reality in Texas right now.

People will always need abortions. In fact, after the birth of my daughter, I had a second abortion. I found myself unexpectedly pregnant when Maya was a year old, and I was experiencing Hyperemesis Gravidarum (HG), a severe sickness during pregnancy that I have had with all pregnancies. However, this time I had a toddler to care for with no additional help. You see, my husband is active duty military and lives four hours away during the week. I did not realize that being a military spouse or a single-parent household is another barrier to accessing abortion care until I was in the situation myself. Due to the HG, I was physically unable to care for or spend time with the baby I chose to have, which broke my spirit. My husband took some time off to help me. We discussed the matter and mutually decided that an abortion was the best decision for our family at the time.

The love I have for Maya made my second abortion the easiest decision I have ever made. Thankfully, the second time around, I had an arsenal of resources at my disposal, knew more than most about abortion in Texas, and was in a better financial situation. My second abortion was empowering, easy, peaceful, and not traumatic. It is the kind of experience I want for all people seeking an abortion.

I am grateful for my abortions because they allowed me to control my body, life, and future. I escaped an abusive relationship, graduated college with honors, and pursued a meaningful career that I felt so passionate about. Exercising my legal right to have an abortion gave me a second chance at life and allowed me to heal from my past traumas. Doing so also made me a better mother because I chose motherhood on my terms and welcomed it with open arms. Lastly, my abortions allowed me to focus all of my love, energy, time, and resources on raising the strongest and most thoughtful little girl I possibly can.

You, as lawmakers, have the opportunity to ensure that all people needing abortions have fair and equitable access. Despite experiencing several barriers, I am thankful that I could access the healthcare that I needed. However, with S.B. 8 in effect, many people will not have that opportunity. I urge you to empathize with the desperation that pregnant people in Texas are experiencing and then take swift action to safeguard their rights and strike down all barriers to abortion care. Your constituents and my community deserve it.

Thank you.