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Insurance Coverage of Abortion for Municipal and County Employees

As politicians and anti-abortion advocates across the country have ratcheted up efforts to ban private insurance coverage of abortion and toughen already-existing bans on public funding of abortion at the state and national levels, local leaders in some communities have made attempts to follow suit. These attacks focus on insurance policies provided to county and municipal employees.

Wake County, NC

Rep. Paul Stam (R-Wake) and his legislative assistant, Keith Weatherly, who is also the mayor of Apex, NC, began pushing for a ban on insurance coverage of abortion for Apex city employees in late 2009. This was framed as a legal issue; in 1981, the State Supreme Court ruled against Wake County providing abortions to indigent women. Rep. Stam argued that this precedent also applied to insurance coverage of abortion for municipal employees in North Carolina. Apex banned abortion coverage in January 2010. Rep. Stam then sent a memo to local governments informing them that he believed insurance coverage of abortion by a county health plan was illegal.

As a result, the Wake County Board of Commissioners banned insurance coverage of abortion in February 2010 via an administrative change. When lawyers from the ACLU, Planned Parenthood, and the University of North Carolina School of Government disputed this interpretation, the insurance ban was put to a vote in March 2010. Following a passionate debate, the Commission voted along party lines to reinstate insurance coverage of abortion. Meanwhile, the Gaston County Commission voted to ban insurance coverage of abortion in reaction to Rep. Stam's letter.

Grand Rapids, MI

Rina Sala-Baker, a former candidate for the Grand Rapids City Commission, collected 1,600 signatures from Grand Rapids residents on a petition asking City Commissioners to investigate whether or not the city had paid for abortions for municipal employees other than those that resulted from rape or incest or threatened the woman's life. The petition also asked the city to exclude "elective abortions" from coverage. At the time the petition was submitted, the municipal insurance policy covered only abortions that are "medically necessary".

Following the petition's submission, First Ward City Commissioner Dave Shaffer announced his intention to submit a resolution written by Grand Rapids Right to Life at the Commission's meeting on June 12, 2012. The resolution would clarify that Grand Rapids' health plan covers abortion only in cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment. In response, Stop the War on Women Grand Rapids organized a coalition of opponents of the resolution to attend, saying "We need the city commissioners to know that one small religious interest group does not speak for the residents of this city." At the June 12 meeting, dozens of residents were in attendance and spoke for a total of 75 minutes on both sides of the proposal. Following this public comment, Commissioner Schaffer proposed the resolution but no other Commissioner, including one who had also been endorsed by Grand Rapids Right to Life, chose to second the motion and the resolution was thus dismissed.