

Utah could charge for mandated pre-abortion ultrasounds under new bill language

Salt Lake Tribune

Feb. 25, 2020

By Bethany Rodgers

<https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2020/02/26/utah-could-charge/>

A new version of a Utah bill requiring pre-abortion ultrasounds could impose costs on pregnant women who turn to the state for the prenatal service.

While the Utah Department of Health currently provides free ultrasounds on request to people considering abortion, the proposed changes would enable officials to charge a “reasonable fee” for the sonograms that would be required before legally terminating a pregnancy. But the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Steve Christiansen, said the free ultrasounds would still be available to women who choose to visit one of several pregnancy resource centers distributed across the state. “It’ll be up to [women], for sure,” the West Jordan Republican said Tuesday. “But, in this case specifically, we’re hoping that ... 80% to 90% of women will take that no-cost option.”

An initial budgetary analysis of HB364 estimated that mandating ultrasounds before an abortion would cost the state’s health department about \$76,900 each year, in anticipation of about 750 additional requests for the free service. If Christiansen’s revised bill is approved, the health department could assess a fee to offset what it spends on each sonogram.

The four pregnancy resource centers cited by Christiansen are located in Salt Lake City, Park City, Brigham City and Roy, and the lawmaker says most of the state’s residents live within a convenient distance of one of the locations. Most, if not all, of the centers are explicitly opposed to abortion, according to their websites.

Alliance for a Better Utah, a group that advocates for progressive policies, said the newest version of Christiansen’s bill would add “more cost, time concerns, and logistic confusion to the already sensitive and complex reality of abortion.”

“This is especially punitive for women in rural communities who would have to travel long distances for multiple appointments,” Lauren Simpson, the alliance’s policy director, said in a prepared statement.

Planned Parenthood Association of Utah has also spoken against a proposal that, they argue, is designed to shame women who want an abortion.

“This bill increases not only the cost burden, but also adds additional logistical and time burdens because it requires every patient to have two visits — one for the ultrasound and a second 72 hours later for the abortion,” Karrie Galloway, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Association of Utah, said in a statement. “If the state wants to require a medically unnecessary procedure, they should pay for it. Not women.”

Mary Taylor, leader of Pro-Life Utah, said some women have private insurance that will cover a sonogram. But she’s hoping that women will seek ultrasounds from one of the resource centers

and that more free services will come to Utah over the next few years. Taylor said an ultrasound would've stopped her from terminating her pregnancy about 40 years ago, a decision that has caused her "decades of grief, sorrow, guilt, remorse."

"If I would have had access to an ultrasound," she said, "I would not have had an abortion that day. I would have another child today. I would probably have grandchildren today."

Christiansen said the intent of his bill is to make sure women have the best information possible before proceeding with an abortion.

However, Alliance for a Better Utah pointed to a new poll — commissioned by the group along with the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah and Planned Parenthood Association of Utah — that indicated few Utahns want the state to enact new abortion restrictions. And slightly more than half want to uphold *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court decision on the procedure, according to the survey.

Currently, the University of Utah performs ultrasounds on behalf of the state health department, which receives about one or two requests each month from women contemplating an abortion, according to Laurie Baksh, who manages the state's maternal and infant health program. State funds cover the cost of the sonograms at a Medicaid rate of about \$83 or \$89, depending on the stage of a pregnancy, Baksh explained.

Under Christiansen's proposal, a physician or technician performing one of the mandated ultrasounds would have to describe "the presence and location of each unborn child in the uterus," display the images so that a woman can see them and make the fetal heartbeat audible to the woman, if possible.

The bill stipulates that nothing would prevent a woman from "averting her eyes" from the ultrasound images or asking the physician to lower the volume of the heartbeat.

A physician would not be allowed to perform an abortion unless a woman presents a completed form demonstrating she has met the ultrasound requirement. Doctors who disregard the mandate would be liable for fines up to \$100,000 for the first offense and \$250,000 for each subsequent offense, according to the proposal.

The substitute language that would allow the state to charge an ultrasound fee has not yet been adopted by lawmakers. Christiansen said he hopes his bill will be assigned to a standing committee for a hearing this week.