

Activists Urge Florida Governor to Sign Pro-Life Bill

✖ Florida pro-life groups are calling on Gov. Charlie Crist to sign a bill they say may be the most important pro-life legislation in the state's history.

The hotly debated HB 1143 passed 76-44 in the Florida House Friday and in the Senate 23-16. The measure requires that women seeking abortions get a \$400 ultrasound beforehand and have the image explained to them.

Photo: Florida Gov. Charlie Crist

Women can be exempt from viewing the ultrasound if they sign a form saying they are not being coerced to have an abortion. They can be exempt from having the ultrasound explained if they can prove they were victims of rape, incest or other crimes.

The bill also prohibits private health insurers that receive state or federal subsidies from providing coverage for abortions. That means women with subsidized healthcare plans would have to buy extra coverage for abortion or pay for it out-of-pocket.

The Christian Coalition of Florida and the Florida Family Policy Council, which in 2008 successfully campaigned for a

state ban on gay marriage, are urging their supporters to contact Crist and press him to sign the measure.

"Short of reversing *Roe v. Wade*, there's no other policy or legal change we could make in the law that would do more to reduce abortions," said John Stemberger, president of the Florida Family Policy Council. "It's just a very important bill and perhaps the most important pro-life bill that's ever been seen in Florida's history."

State Rep. Scott Plakon, who co-sponsored the bill, said the measure's impact could extend beyond Florida. "Depending on whose count you believe, we're the third- or fourth-largest state," Plakon told *Charisma*. "So our ability to get legislation like this passed, I think, will have an impact on the way other states view [similar pro-life legislation]. The impact of this will go beyond the state of Florida."

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Florida and Planned Parenthood agree that the measure could have a dramatic impact on abortion and are lobbying Crist to veto the legislation. Roughly 80 percent of the 6,300 calls and e-mails to the governor have asked him to reject the bill, the *Miami Herald* reported.

"Simply put, it's cruel to involve government in the private health decisions of women, and wrong for government to interfere in the contractual relationship between health insurance providers and private businesses," said Howard Simon, executive director of the ACLU

of Florida, in a statement this week.

Bill opponents say the measure would unfairly traumatize women facing an unplanned pregnancy. But supporters say it would help women make a more informed decision.

Crist has said he has "very serious concerns" about the bill because it requires women to pay \$400 for the ultrasound, regardless of their ability to pay.

"I'm concerned about it," Crist said Wednesday, according to the *Miami Herald*. "Even though I'm pro-life I don't want to impose my will on others."

Crist's record on pro-life issues is mixed. In 1995, when he was a state senator, Crist cast the deciding vote to defeat a waiting period for all abortions, but during a 1998 U.S. Senate campaign he described himself as "pro-choice, but not pro-abortion," the *Herald* reported.

Now that he is running in a tight U.S. Senate race, observers expect him to follow the political winds. Last week he changed his party affiliation from Republican to independent in order to avoid losing the Republican primary to newcomer Marco Rubio, who is pro-life and a conservative favorite.

Some say a veto fits the more moderate image of an independent and have questioned whether Crist really has a chance to win pro-life voters because of Rubio's popularity among conservatives. But

Stemberger notes that surveys last year show that a slight majority of Americans identify as pro-life, and a December 2009 Quinnipiac poll found that 72 percent of Americans oppose federal funding for abortion.

"That's a pretty big chunk of electorate," Stemberger said of the Quinnipiac poll results, "and it goes way beyond the more activist element of the pro-life movement."

Plakon is optimistic Crist will support the measure. "

The governor has repeatedly during his campaign described himself as pro-life," Plakon said. "So I would find it unthinkable that he would veto something that would have the effect of reducing abortions in the state of Florida, likely by thousands or tens of thousands per year. Even people that are pro-choice talk about abortions being more rare. This would have the effect of doing that."

Stemberger said he believes Crist can be swayed to support the measure, but his signature "really hangs in the balance at this point," he said. "It's really, really important that people who are pro-life speak out, call, write and e-mail the governor."