

Eyes of the Nation Fixed on Maine's FGM Bill Vote

Maine State Representative Heather W. Sirocki will make an impassioned plea to her fellow Maine lawmakers about a bill to make the horrific act of female genital mutilation a crime in the state.

Sirocki, who represents District 28, is the sponsor of L.D. 745, which, if passed, would add Maine to a list of 24 other states that already have similar statutes on their books. The Maine Senate overwhelmingly voted previously to approve a ban on female genital mutilation, but the Maine House of Representatives narrowly rejected a similar bill. The revised bill is back with the Senate for a potential vote this week. Once the bill returns to the House, Sirocki will talk to her peers about her commitment to the issue.

"This bill has been close to my heart for months," Sirocki said. "Maine has already been identified as one of eight high-risk locations in the country, and an education and outreach program has already been established through the federal government. My bill does not abandon that outreach program. My bill is an addition to it. The bill's intent was simply a prohibition of child abuse, and it could serve as a deterrent.

"We could be and we should be sending a strong message to the affected communities that female genital mutilation is not legal in Maine. Period," she continued. "State prosecutors need state laws. I urge your support of this amended bill that combines both a state prohibition and also an additional state-run education/preventative outreach program.

"I hope we never have one arrest, and I hope we never have one prosecution. But we know that the effects of FGM are here in Maine as evidenced by the payments made to providers in our

MaineCare billing system, and I also know from our state being selected as one of eight high-risk areas in the country to receive the federal outreach grant, and I also know from the horrific anecdotes from medical providers and others who are interacting with the affected community.

“For those who remain unconvinced that this is happening here, I ask, ‘What harm is there in passing a law that is never used?’ I also ask, ‘What if it saves one little girl from experiencing the pain and suffering from this horrific crime?’”

Sirocki concluded, “I hate the thought of little girls living in our midst who may be subjected to this painful form of child abuse and assault. These little girls need our help. Please set your differences with me aside and help them. It is my understanding that many organizations such as Equality Now, UNICEF and the United Way fully support criminalizing female genital mutilation at the state level. Our esteemed colleagues in the Senate—both Democrats and Republicans—came together last week to unanimously support this bill. I can only deduce that there is one main reason to vote against protecting young girls—and that is personal animus towards me. That is never a valid reason.”

Many Americans are unaware that the barbaric practice known as female genital mutilation (FGM) occurs not just in other countries, but right here in the United States as well. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control, over half a million girls and women in America have already been subjected to such mutilation—or are at risk of having it inflicted upon them. Reportedly, some of them live in the state of Maine.

“We must define and identify for the prosecution and for the public that this crime is a specific form of child abuse,” said Elizabeth Yore, head of the new initiative End FGM Today, “so that doctors, teachers and hospital personnel know

specifically what to report when they see it. Female genital mutilation is a new hideous phenomenon in the U.S. legislators and prosecutors must specifically identify the most heinous crimes so that a jury can identify them in a trial. Clearly, FGM must have specific prohibitive laws attached to it and be clearly defined, just as child pornography and child exploitation are. In addition to Maine, we implore all states to call out this heinous crime.” {eoa}