

'Coerced abortion' bill sent back for rewrite

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The craftsmanship of a bill authored by state Rep. Molly White, R-Belton, intended to prevent women from being coerced into having abortions was met with skepticism on Wednesday by the chairman of the House State Affairs Committee, who suggested the freshman lawmaker get some "real legal folks" to help draft a better measure.



White's House Bill 1648, which came before the committee, would make it a crime to coerce or force women to have abortions, and create a 72-hour waiting period for women who indicate they are being coerced or forced. But state affairs Chairman Byron Cook, R-Corsicana, left the measure pending after other lawmakers and some anti-abortion advocates raised concerns about the details of the bill.

<http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/ketr/files/story/161504/molly-white.jpg>

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"This committee has passed out a number of [studies and pieces of legislation in this waiting](http://www.kera.com/news/2015/04/30/this-white-imp) the one thing I think we've learned is they have to be extremely well-crafted," Cook said in a directive for White to beef up the bill's language so it can withstand additional scrutiny and possible legal challenges. "My suggestion is that you get some real legal folks to help engage on this, so if you can keep this moving forward you can potentially have the success others have had."

Cook's remarks came after Republican state Rep. Dan Huberty of Houston, the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops and Texas Alliance for Life — all of whom supported the premise of the bill — raised concerns about the unintended consequences of the legislation.

Most were rooted in the bill's 72-hour waiting period for women who say they are being coerced into seeking the procedure. The state already imposes a 24-hour waiting period on all women seeking an abortion.

Huberty said he wanted more specifics in the bill about when women are asked about coercion in order to trigger the waiting period, while the two other groups questioned the extended waiting period altogether.

White told the committee she intended to rewrite the bill to reduce the waiting period to 48 hours and allow victims of human trafficking to opt-out of the extended waiting period.

But representatives for the two anti-abortion groups said they'd prefer for the waiting period to be uniform for all women, fearing that extended waiting periods could endanger women by tipping off their coercers.

Alliance for Life's concerns about the bill highlighted ongoing tension between the state's two most prominent anti-abortion groups. Texas Right to Life endorsed White's measure, including the extended waiting period.

When Cook questioned John Seago, a Texas Right to Life lobbyist, about whether he feared the waiting period would put women at risk, Seago responded that he didn't understand that argument.

Questions were also raised about the definition of coercion used in the bill, indicating that the bill defined coercion within the scope of bribery and not abortion.

White, who said she was coerced into having an abortion and wanted to prevent other women from suffering similar ordeals, vowed to address those concerns and make the fixes in a substitute bill that would be provided to the committee.

This article originally appeared in The Texas Tribune at <http://www.texastribune.org/2015/04/29/chairman-says-coerced-abortion-bill-needs-rewrite/>.



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