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WITNESS STATEMENT

OF

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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL

OF THE

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

SUBJECT:

SERVICE MEMBERS' REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND READINESS

JULY 29, 2022

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Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Gallagher, and distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about service members' reproductive health and readiness. The views expressed in this testimony are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.

I am Sharon Arana, a major and intelligence officer in the United States Air Force. I am a prior enlisted officer with 24 and a half years of active-duty service. In the summer of 2009, a week before graduating Officer Training School, I discovered that my birth control pill had failed. At the time, I was a single mother of two, recently divorced, and a week from commissioning.

When I realized I had missed my period, I asked my partner to take me to the store to buy a home pregnancy test. I didn't want to go to the base clinic to get tested because it would prompt a profile and my chain of command would instantly be notified of my pregnancy. I also knew the clinic couldn't help me find access to an abortion. I didn't feel comfortable testing in the dorms where I was living while I was in training, so I took the pregnancy test in a gas station bathroom.

My then-boyfriend/now-husband and I had agreed that continuing with the pregnancy was not the right decision for us. We were stationed in Alabama and access to abortion was restricted. So, the weekend before we graduated training, we drove 3.5 hours to Atlanta. The morning of my appointment, I learned that Georgia had a three-day "cooling off" period, which meant that the first day was only to confirm the pregnancy. The same pregnancy that I had already confirmed in that gas station bathroom. I was expected to return to the clinic in three days for the abortion. But, since I was in training, I needed to return to Alabama to finish my course in order to commission later that week. By chance, I had already planned a trip to my hometown of Brooklyn, New York after my graduation. In New York, I had

access to the healthcare I needed and had an abortion. I paid \$400 out of pocket, and I recovered at home for a few days while on leave.

About three weeks after arriving in Texas, I sought further medical care after experiencing bleeding. At the clinic on base, I informed the nurse that I had had an abortion a few weeks prior. While my bleeding was a natural part of my healing process and not harmful to me, my nurse said she would keep my abortion a secret and not add it to my medical records “just in case.” I was confused and felt stigmatized for having an abortion. Like I was being judged for the decision that my partner and I had carefully made together. I was never offered any support or follow-on care at the clinic. Instead, I was sent on my way back to training without my pregnancy termination ever documented in my medical records.

Choosing to have an abortion was not an easy one. My husband and I will be celebrating our 11-year anniversary this year, and we have never doubted that choosing to wait to start our family together was the right decision. We went on to have two more children together when it was right for us and our careers. Our four beautiful babies are a testament to the importance of having access to critical healthcare, including abortion. We are a dual-military family that, combined, has over 40 years serving in active duty, multiple deployments, years stationed apart, missed birthdays and anniversaries, and countless weekends and holidays working missions. We wouldn't change a thing.

I know that if I didn't have an abortion, I would not have been able to continue my training as a single mother and brand-new lieutenant going through officer intel school. I also know that it didn't have to be that difficult. I was fortunate enough to come from a state that honors a woman's right to make her own decisions, and I wasn't forced to carry through with a pregnancy against my will

I have put my uniform on for the past 24 and half years with pride, and I am honored to be able to continue wearing it. My family and I continue to make sacrifices because we believe in what this

nation stands for. I believe that, for everyone in this chamber, the health and wellbeing of my fellow servicemembers and their families should be a top priority.

My husband and I would not have been able to continue our military careers had we been forced to carry that pregnancy. As an unwed mother of two, geographically separated from my partner and family, I would not be where I am today. Our family - the one at home and in uniform - has benefited because I was able to travel to a state that recognized that family-building decisions were ours to make alone.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.