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## Rebecca Mastee: Protect rights for health workers

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A recent viewpoint column regarding Michigan Senate Bill 136, the Religious Liberty and Conscience Protection Act, proved a disservice to the LSJ and its readers. The column was factually inaccurate and relied on scare tactics by highlighting a case in Ireland which, of course, has different laws than the United States. Let's set the record straight about SB 136.

The purpose of the bill is to maintain civil liberties and conscience rights that our nation has cherished for over 200 years. Unfortunately, these constitutional rights are slowly eroding as government mandates are forcing individuals and institutions to act contrary to their religious teachings.

SB 136 seeks to protect conscience rights by providing legal protections for those in the health care field. Many of these protections already exist under federal law, but are lacking in state law. Specifically, the bill would allow health care professionals to assert a conscience right regarding elective, non-emergency procedures. It would allow employers to offer their employees a benefit plan consistent with its institutional beliefs. And it would ensure that under no circumstance will a patient or prospective patient's care be compromised.

It is important to note that SB 136 further protects patients by strengthening laws already in place. Currently, if a hospital accepts government funding, as virtually every hospital in the country does, that facility is federally prohibited from denying emergency care to anyone. SB 136 strengthens those protections.

The bill also protects the status quo by mirroring civil rights laws. Several federal policies, such as the Church Amendment, the Hyde Amendment, the Weldon Amendment and others, ensure the federal government does not discriminate against those who assert their conscience rights in health care. Numerous presidents and Congresses, of both parties, have consistently passed and signed appropriations legislation upholding these rights.

In essence, SB 136 strikes a balance between health care employers and their patients' needs while upholding employee religious liberty rights. The legislation allows an employer to craft an employee accommodation policy in advance of any elective, non-emergency procedure or service that an employee may find objectionable, such as distributing abortion-inducing drugs or services that impact end of life care.

To alleviate concerns about discrimination, the legislation specifically forbids an accommodation based on a patient or any patient's ability to pay for a service. SB 136 is about protecting individuals and institutions in Michigan *from* discrimination, as federal law already provides.

For over 30 years Michigan has protected conscience rights related to abortion procedures. This policy has worked well, just as Senate Bill 136 will accomplish for other elective procedures. In fact, measures similar to SB 136 have been in place in other states for several years. In Illinois, legislation has protected conscience rights for over a decade without compromising patient care or employer needs. So let's join together as Michigan citizens, with appreciation for our differences, and say yes to Senate Bill 136. Let's say yes to conscience rights. And let's say yes to protecting civil and religious liberties.

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