

Capitol Recap: Reproductive Health Act is Law; Industrial Hemp

By CAPITOL NEWS ILLINOIS

CHICAGO — Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker made Illinois the most liberal state in the U.S. for access to reproductive health care with the stroke of 20 pens Wednesday, June 12, at the Chicago Cultural Center. It was a vow he made at the beginning of the legislative session, and a charge both backers and detractors of the Reproductive Health Act maintained would come to pass. The measure became law immediately with his signature.

Pritzker said the law makes the Prairie State a "beacon" for access to pregnancy care, contraception, birth control, abortion procedures and other related benefits by making access to these things a "fundamental right." That means no level of government in Illinois can infringe upon a woman or man's access to reproductive health care. "Let the word go forth today from this place that if you believe in standing up for women's fundamental rights, Illinois is a beacon of hope in the heart of this nation. We trust women," the governor said.

While opponents say the law strikes protections from statute — including the automatic autopsy of a woman who dies during an abortion, penalties for an illegally-performed abortion post-viability and inspections of clinics where the procedure is done — proponents say it codifies current practices and removes aspects of statute enjoined by the courts.

Advocates also point out the measure treats abortion procedures as health care.

"The government shouldn't be able to tell a woman what's best for her body and her future. By making the Reproductive Health Care law in Illinois, we're sending a clear message — that we trust women to make their decisions about their bodies," Senate sponsor Melinda Bush, a Democrat from Grayslake, said. "We believe that women should have the same autonomy over their bodies that men do."

The legislation was introduced in February by House sponsor Rep. Kelly Cassidy, a Democrat from Chicago, and in the Senate by Bush. The twin bills sat in legislative limbo until early May, when calls for action came from advocates and lawmakers after moves by states such as Louisiana, Georgia and Missouri to restrict access to abortion procedures.

"All of us believe the state of Missouri and the rest of the states that have passed laws taking away women's rights should change their minds,

should revisit the issue," Pritzker said. "But Illinois knows where we stand and we're going to be here for women if they have to be refugees from other states. We don't want them to be — we want women to be able to access health care where they live and all of us believe in that."

Immediately following the signing ceremony, opponents of the act held a news event in opposition to the new law. Present were representatives from the Thomas More Society, a Chicago-based pro-life law firm, and Illinois Right to Life Action, a pro-life lobbying group.

"It's a tale as old as time. Illinois politicians are more concerned with pandering to cash-wielding progressives and Chicago media outlets than they are with representing the people of our state," said Mary Kate Knorr, Illinois Right to Life Action spokeswoman. "Pritzker doesn't care what the people of Illinois want, nor does he care that abortion takes a human life."

Peter Breen, vice president and senior counsel of the law firm, said the "deceptively titled" Reproductive Health Act makes Illinois "an abortion destination for the country."

MENDOZA INTERVIEW: With a fiscal year 2020 operating budget in place and a historic legislative session in the rearview mirror, Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza is "cautiously optimistic" about the state's new direction.

"I think this was truly the most monumentally historic session that I have witnessed in my lifetime. And I've been around the Springfield legislature now for 20 years," Mendoza said.

Mendoza, a Chicago Democrat who took office in the middle of an unprecedented 736-day state budget impasse, said there was not much in Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker's agenda she disagreed with this year. She led her to play a less vocal role than she did during the tumultuous governorship of Republican Bruce Rauner.

"I don't want to be seen as 'oh, she's being so nice to the governor,' but the reality of it is (Pritzker) deserves the accolades," Mendoza said. "That was a huge lift and he did it in his first term, which far exceeded the expectations that I would have had for a brand new governor, and he managed to bring Democrats and Republicans together in a way that Governor Rauner couldn't even bring his own members together outside of bringing them together through fear."

Specifically, she emphasized the importance of the \$40.1 billion operating budget, a \$45

billion capital plan, and new revenues which will result from marijuana legalization and gambling expansion.

Despite these steps, Mendoza said it's important to "remain grounded" and focused on paying down Illinois' outsized bill backlog, which sits between \$6 billion and \$7 billion.

"We have \$6.6 billion worth of bills that have not been paid yet, which means that we still owe that money; those are real liabilities that have been incurred," she said. "But this is by far, by far, the closest thing that we've seen to a balanced budget in probably over a decade."

Mendoza said she was encouraged by \$1.2 billion in bonding authorization included in the budget which she said would combine with federal matching funds to pay down \$1.5 billion in health care bills which are incurring late payment interest rates of 9 to 12 percent.

For taxpayers, this means a savings in the "hundreds of millions," she said.

INDUSTRIAL HEMP: Trent

Lawrence and his wife, Jami, work a 26-acre farm outside of Delavan, about 30 miles south of Peoria, in Tazewell County. For the past several years, they've been growing organic peppers, tomatoes and a variety of other specialty crops. But this year, they're starting a new crop that became legal in Illinois only earlier this year, industrial hemp.

The Lawrences have hundreds of seedlings growing in a greenhouse, and hundreds more on top of that germinating under lights in an upstairs room of the house that sits on the property.

With luck, each of those plants will grow to produce one to two pounds of flower rich in a compound called cannabidiol, more commonly known as CBD, which when extracted can be used to control a wide range of medical conditions including seizure disorders. And with market prices ranging from \$80 to \$100 a pound, depending on its CBD content, that makes each one of those seedlings extremely valuable.

That industry, however, be-

came possible only in recent years. Since the 1930s, industrial hemp had been illegal in the United States, with a brief exception during World War II, because it was classified as a narcotic in the same category as marijuana. It was only in 2014 that Congress began allowing states to authorize limited production for research purposes, and it was finally legalized completely in the 2018 Farm Bill, which Congress passed in December.

"Six months ago, this would have been the mother of all felonies," Lawrence said as he looked around his greenhouse. "It's no joke. Until the 2018 Farm Bill was signed, it was still under controlled substance territory. This would have been a Schedule I drug, but since they deregulated CBD — they removed CBD out of the Schedule I drug category."

Lawrence said the plants classify as industrial hemp as long as they test below 0.3 percent Tetrahydrocannabinol, more commonly known as THC, the principal psychoactive ingredient in marijuana.

"So, we can grow a CBD

crop now, as long as we don't go above 0.3 percent delta-9-THC," he said.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture began accepting applications for licenses to grow industrial hemp on April 30, and as of June 10, according to agency figures, the state had issued licenses to 474 growers covering just over 12,103 acres.

That's actually quite small compared to the 11 million acres of corn the state produced in 2017, or the 10 million acres of soybeans farmers grew that same year.

NURSING HOME FUNDING: Funding for nursing homes serving the state's most vulnerable elderly population will increase by \$240 million next fiscal year as part of the state's recently-passed budget.

Advocates for the nursing home industry say the added funding will help stem a tide of 20-plus skilled- and intermediate-care facility closures that occurred over the past five years due to crippling budget cuts and decades-old Medicaid reimbursement rates.

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