



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chairman
House Appropriations Committee
2207 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
2413 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairwoman
Senate Appropriations Committee
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

May 23, 2024

Dear Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, Chairwoman Murray, Vice Chair Collins, members of the United States House and Senate Appropriations Committees:

I write to you as the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). The ERLC represents the public policy interests of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, with over 45,000 churches and nearly 13 million members.

As Congress begins the negotiations process for Fiscal Year 2025 appropriations, I write to express the pro-life priorities of Southern Baptists for consideration during negotiations.

Following the decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, Southern Baptists have expressed a [strong desire](#) for lawmakers to enact policies that care for both vulnerable mothers and preborn children. From the moment of conception to natural death, we believe that each person is made in the image of God and worthy of protection and care, regardless of age or ability. Southern Baptists live out the tenets of these beliefs by personally engaging in adoption and foster care, volunteering at and supporting pregnancy care centers, and advocating to protect life and human flourishing at every stage of development.

In recent months, there has been much debate on the national stage regarding the role and responsibility Congress has to protect preborn life. Yet, such conversation often neglects this reality: Congress already bears a weighty responsibility in directing much of pro-life policy through its appropriations work.



As a result, we urge you to consider three primary pro-life policy areas during appropriations negotiations: retaining existing baseline pro-life protections, ensuring conscience protections remain steadfast, and preventing the use of government funding to expand access to and misuse of vulnerable preborn lives through the unregulated practice of assisted reproductive technologies, such as IVF.

Pro-life riders have been maintained for decades and remain essential in protecting life and the consciences of taxpayers.

Many appropriations bills contain provisions that limit the use of federal funding to directly fund abortions, advertise for abortion, or otherwise promote abortion with taxpayer dollars. Millions of Americans around the country oppose abortion due to their deeply-held religious and moral beliefs, and these riders function as safeguards to both protect life and ensure the federal government has no overreach that results in a misuse of federal funding at the taxpayer's expense.

Some baseline pro-life riders have remained in place for over 50 years, and there is a long and rich history of Congress time and again reaffirming its commitment to protecting life in federal law. The repeated inclusion of the Hyde-family of pro-life riders across multiple appropriations bills, ranging from the Department of Justice to Health and Human Services to Veterans Affairs, speaks to the centrality of their purpose in federal law. Retaining these riders both protects life and better enables federal agencies to fulfill their purpose. True justice requires the protection of the vulnerable; true healthcare treats both the preborn child and their mother as patients and safeguards life in all stages.

In recent years, the Biden administration has worked to limit the scope of these riders and has aggressively used nearly every agency to push forward a pro-abortion agenda. In light of that reality, we urge your committees to work towards expanding these riders to prevent taxpayer funding from being used for abortion, abortion-related travel, or abortion-related leave across the federal government.

The inclusion of both existing baseline and new pro-life riders is not charting a new course in federal policy, but rather, is an essential continuation along the path set by the Founding Fathers in both the Declaration of Independence and the First Amendment, and retained by every Congress since. There is no political justification that should ever prevail over continuing vital federal pro-life protections that have been maintained for decades, each of which show respect for life and for deeply-held moral and religious beliefs.



Conscience protections allow healthcare providers and government employees to serve and fulfill the duties of their office without fear of retaliation.

As Congress and the judiciary have repeatedly affirmed, religious liberty includes both freedom of belief and freedom to live out one's beliefs. Notably, Congress reaffirmed this in 1993 with the near-unanimous passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which ensures the federal government must meet the standards of "strict scrutiny" before superseding religious belief.

Similarly, conscience protections in appropriations provide consistency in federal law by ensuring spending is not used to force government employees, healthcare workers at institutions that receive federal funding, and other recipients of taxpayer dollars to provide or enable abortions in conflict with their religious beliefs. These riders ensure some of the most ardent and sacrificing caregivers and public servants are not forced to choose between leaving the workplace or risking litigation to avoid violating their conscience as they serve the American people.

Any expansion of access to assisted reproductive technology through government funding must be accompanied by language establishing minimal ethical standards of care.

Southern Baptists' belief that life is inherently valuable, endowed with dignity as persons made in God's image, does not change based on the mechanism by which a precious preborn child is conceived. Additionally, Southern Baptists affirm the desire to build families, and we grieve the impact of infertility on those seeking to expand their family, including many in our own churches.

However, many forms of assisted reproductive technology (ARTs) involve numerous moral and ethical factors of deep concern for Southern Baptists. The fertility industry at large operates in the United States free from baseline regulations, requirements, and even reporting standards, with almost no protections for parents who undergo the process of in vitro fertilization (IVF) or for any embryos created. In contrast to the laws in place in other nations, there are no limitations on the number of embryos that may be created at any one time, no minimum standard of care for embryos being stored indefinitely, and no longer any enforced reporting or oversight requirements by the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

Because of [recent actions](#) by the Biden Administration, we are especially concerned with increased access to IVF without adequate consideration of what such access would entail. Should you choose to expand taxpayer-funded access to IVF despite these moral and ethical considerations, we ask that you similarly include and expand existing language currently present in the appropriations text that prohibits the destruction of embryos while encouraging embryo adoption and providing reimbursement for adoption at large.



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We know that you are juggling many competing requests and priorities, but the protection of life must remain paramount in these negotiations. As always, we are committed to praying for each of you as you navigate these complex matters, and ask God to give you wisdom and discernment.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues.

Respectfully,

Frederick Brent Leatherwood
President
Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
of the Southern Baptist Convention