

# Parental notice law back on California ballot, faces well-funded foes

SAN FRANCISCO – Pro-life groups are asking California voters to approve a measure that would prohibit abortions involving underage girls until 48 hours after a parent or other family member has been notified.

Proposition 4, commonly referred to as “Sarah’s Law,” qualified for the Nov. 4 ballot. It will be the third parental notification measure put forward in California in four years. Even though similar laws are on the books in more than 30 states, the two previous initiatives, Proposition 73 in 2005 and Proposition 85 in 2006, were voted down after well-funded opposition led by Planned Parenthood.

Proposition 73 failed with 47.2 percent of the vote; Proposition 85 received 45.8 percent.

Proposition 4 is sponsored by Friends of Sarah, a committee with major funding by Sonoma County winemaker and former Republican state Assemblyman Don Sebastiani and by Jim Holman, publisher of the San Diego Reader and a major contributor to the previous parental notification measures.

The California Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state’s Catholic bishops, has endorsed the measure.

Proposition 4 differs from the previous measures by addressing criticism that notification could subject pregnant girls to parental abuse. The measure states that if such abuse is reported another adult family member can be notified of the abortion.

Acceptable adult family members include a grandparent, stepparent, foster parent, aunt, uncle, sibling, half-sibling or first cousin of a minor. The family member must be at least 21 years old.

Proposition 4 provides for a judicial override “based on clear and convincing evidence of (the) minor’s maturity or best interests.” Parents also can sign a Department of Health Services form authorizing an abortion without parental notice. No notice is required if the physician concludes the abortion is necessary to save the minor’s life.

Proponents say the measure is meant both to protect young people and to reduce the rate of abortions among minors.

“In every state where parental notification has passed, abortions (for minors) plummeted,” said Vicki Evans, director of the Respect Life Program of the Office of Public Policy and Social Concerns for the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

Ms. Evans said Proposition 4 makes good medical sense as well.

“It’s very inappropriate to have a serious medical procedure without notifying a parent,” she said. “It’s a real conflict with parental rights. Also, with these laws, there is always a judicial bypass, which is generally granted.”

Proponents argue that Proposition 4 would protect underage girls from sexual predators. In a 1995 study among 46,000 school-age girls in California, researchers reported most pregnancies were the result of sexual relationships with adult men between five and seven years older.

Ms. Evans said Proposition 4 faces an uphill battle. The two previous initiatives failed largely because of opposition TV ads warning of the dangers of parental abuse, and the new language in Proposition 4 has not convinced Planned Parenthood that parental notification is good policy.

Ms. Evans said Proposition 8, the proposed state constitutional amendment to define marriage as only between a man and a woman, could draw many socially conservative voters to the polls and give “Sarah’s Law” a boost.

Carol Hogan, director of pastoral programs and communication for the California Catholic Conference, agreed. She predicted most of the lobbying attention will go to Proposition 8, but voter spillover could push Proposition 4 over the top.

Mr. Holman said he is hopeful about the measure's passage. "We came so close the last two times with so little money, and with no television advertising," he said.

"Sarah's Law" advocates have raised roughly \$2.4 million, against nearly \$4 million for the No-on-4 campaign.