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Apologizing for Historical Coerced Sterilization Practices

Coerced sterilization is a shameful part of America’s history, as it was used as a means of controlling the growth of “undesirable” populations such as immigrants, people of color, poor people, unmarried mothers, the disabled, and the mentally ill. The practice was wide-spread, as federally-funded sterilization programs operated in 32 states throughout the 20th century.

Throughout the 1900s, California had one of the most active sterilization programs in the nation. California state legislators passed a law in 1909 authorizing involuntary sterilization, and over the course of decades, California sterilized more than 20,000 people. Involuntary sterilizations conducted on people in state institutions were motivated by the eugenics movement, which believed that some people are more fit to reproduce than others. All people affected by California’s program lived in state institutions and were classified as having disabilities or deemed “unfit for reproduction.” Research indicates that the majority of these sterilizations were done on women and girls and disproportionately impacted Latinas, who were 59% more likely to be sterilized

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than non-Latinas.

Eugenic sterilization programs are now recognized as a major human rights abuse. In 2003, Governor Gray Davis and the California State Senate apologized for California's eugenic sterilization program. Senate Bill 1190 was recently introduced by Senator Nancy Skinner and would establish the Eugenics Sterilization Compensation Program. The bill is co-sponsored by California Latinas for Reproductive Justice and Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, with support from dozens of additional advocacy organizations. SB 1190 would compensate survivors of involuntary sterilization under California's eugenic law, which was on the books from 1909 to 1979. Researchers estimate that in 2019 there will be 631 remaining survivors, 25% of whom are anticipated to come forward to claim compensation. If SB 1190 is passed, California will join North Carolina and Virginia, the only two states to date that have developed compensation efforts for survivors sterilized under state eugenics laws.

Regretfully, Los Angeles County also participated in questionable sterilization practices between 1968 and 1974. Although the women who were subjected to these sterilization procedures provided written or oral consent, there is a question as to whether, due to possible language and cultural barriers, the consent was truly informed. Over 200 women who delivered babies at the Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center, the majority of whom were low income and born in Mexico, were possibly coerced into getting postpartum tubal ligations. At least some of the women were not aware they had been sterilized, and only learned that they had lost their reproductive rights during subsequent doctors' visits. It is significant and necessary to acknowledge the irreparable harm inflicted onto the women who were subjected to these coerced sterilizations at Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center, and to their families.

Every person's reproductive capacity should be controlled by themselves, and not by other individuals, institutions, or the state. Stereotypes and assumptions about the quality of life and capacities of people with disabilities are never legitimate factors in evaluating what is medically necessary treatment. All people should be treated with respect and dignity regarding their lives and reproduction, especially those who have historically been disenfranchised. Although the County has not participated in coerced sterilization practices for decades, it is never too late for a government to apologize to people that it has harmed.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

- 1) Instruct the Chief Executive Officer to prepare a five-signature letter to the County's state delegation to express the County's support of SB 1190 (D-Skinner);
- 2) Issue an official apology to the women who delivered babies at the Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center and were coerced into receiving postpartum tubal ligations between 1968 and 1974; and
- 3) Instruct the Department of Health Services to design and install a plaque on the Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center campus to express the County's sincere apologies to the women and families that were harmed by the County's coercive sterilization practices.