

Building Power is a monthly newsletter by the Center for Reproductive Rights for state advocates and legislators interested in advancing reproductive health and rights.

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PROACTIVE VISION

Persistence Pays Off in Rhode Island!



Photo: The Womxn Project

In 2018, the Womxn Project set a goal to help enact a law to protect the right to abortion in Rhode Island regardless of what happens to *Roe v. Wade*. The group, along with their partners and legislative champions in the state, advocated tirelessly over the last six months towards their goal. On June 19th, the Reproductive Privacy Act was passed by the legislature and signed by Governor Raimondo the very same day. The Womxn Project shared some reflections on their experience this session as well as their vision for the future in Rhode Island.

CRR: Can you tell us a little bit about the unique challenges you faced in Rhode Island, a state with a Democratic trifecta but with a significant anti-choice, Catholic presence in the legislature? Are there any lessons learned that can be applied elsewhere?

TWP: The answer is yes. Even with a trifecta of democratic leadership, this legislation would not have happened without many people working very hard for multiple years. As you might imagine, given that Rhode Island is the most Catholic state in the country, many of our elected officials were not comfortable talking about abortion and were nervous about retribution from the Catholic Church. The Womxn Project started in early 2017. Our first goal was to get our supporters comfortable talking about abortion and to push the local media to ask our elected officials about their position on abortion. Throughout this whole process, we learned that increased discussion builds confidence and can lead to real change.

The legislation we were working on in Rhode Island was first introduced in 1993 and passed the Rhode Island House that year. Despite a long history of Democratic control of our State Senate and House, there had never been the votes in the Rhode Island Senate to pass affirming legislation to protect abortion. That changed on November 6, 2018 when, with the election of new voices, we finally got enough votes in the Senate to pass such a bill.

Though we had the trifecta of Democratic Leadership in the legislature, leadership in both chambers were all endorsed by Right to Life. However, on our side, our movement had the votes in both chambers, the support of the Governor and all General Officers, and a poll showing that 71% of Rhode Islanders support protecting access to safe, legal abortion. The uphill battle for us was getting the leadership in the House and Senate to take action on the legislation to protect safe, legal abortion.

After 2018, 20 members of the RI House formed the Reform Caucus and voted against the Speaker. While this did not change the leadership in the House, it did show the Speaker that there was support for dissent among the Democratic caucus and many in the Reform Caucus were also supporters of legislation to protect safe, legal abortion. This was an important step in getting the Speaker of the House to understand the need to take action. The process in our House was much quicker than the Senate. The legislation was passed in the House on March 7th. The Speaker did not vote for the legislation, but let it come to the Floor. Further, the House Majority Leader and House Majority Whip, despite their past endorsements from the opposition, voted for the legislation.

CRR: What were the most helpful tools and strategies you used over the last six months to continue engaging your supporters and inspire them to act? What were some of your favorite actions?

TWP: The Womxn Project had a strategic and focused ladder of engagement. Starting in late 2018, we held house parties with members of the Rhode Island House and Senate. Attendees at the house parties signed postcards and quilt squares, received education on how the State House worked and engage with elected officials. These house parties helped build pods of supporters who we engaged with throughout the session and leveraged to help turn people out to the State House.

Overlaying this practical ladder of engagement is our use of art as activism. The reality is that most people have no idea what to do when they show up at the State House, so over the six months of our legislative session, we created numerous ways to engage with art to bring

people into the space. The amazing thing we saw happen was that when people first came for an art action like music, ballet, or zine making, they would return to future events, even events without art actions.

The Womxn Project, in our short existence, has become known for doubling down on thank yous: so far, we have given out cupcakes, cookies, pies, and flowers. During the 2019 session, one of our favorite ways of saying 'thank you' was bouquets of flowers. For very little money, a supporter made these beautiful, big pink bouquets of flowers in a very affordable vase. We mention that they were affordable because when we showed up in the Senate with these bouquets, people were concerned they exceeded the gift limit. We delivered these bouquets to the 17 sponsors of our legislation and, interestingly, our General Assembly only publicly shares the top five co-sponsors of a bill once it's introduced. So, until these 17 bouquets were displayed on their desks, some Senators were not aware which of their colleagues were the other co-sponsors. There are 38 Senators in the RI Senate and seeing 17 desks with huge bouquets created a powerful visual display of support. When the session started that day, the Senate President was looking out at desks and could see all these flowers. There are 33 Democrats in the RI Senate and 5 Republicans. All 17 co-sponsors were Democrats, so that day, when he looked out at the Senate, he was visually reminded that a majority of his caucus wanted to see this legislation passed.

This is just one example of the overlapping ways art and activism can enhance and move legislation—In our state, it is not enough for activists to engage, elected officials also had to be shown the overwhelming support for the legislation.

In Rhode Island, one significant place you can make an impact is by showing up inside our State House every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 3:30 to 5:30 pm. Since the point of being there is mainly to be seen and take up space, we got creative to ensure that the ways in which we spent our time there didn't feel like a waste. Over the course of this campaign, The Womxn Project sent over 20,000 handwritten postcards to constituents in key districts asking them to take action. A significant amount of these postcards were written while people watched in the Senate gallery or waited in Senate committees.

One volunteer came up with an idea to knit a section of our amazing community quilt, which we have been building for two years. This quilt visually shows the support for keeping abortion safe and legal in Rhode Island and each square represents one Rhode Islander. Many of our volunteers really loved the knitting and found it a nice change of pace from postcard-writing.

Along those lines, we also had people dress up in handmaid costumes. Again, once we offered this option, new people showed up. We found that this action either engaged people or they hated it, and even within our organization, we had very mixed feelings about the handmaids. We did it because it attracted new people and kept them engaged. It was also a good point of entry for people who previously felt alienated or intimidated by the political process and the State House. As handmaids, they could be there and make an impact without having to speak or feel pressured to lobby, and they could more easily avoid interacting with opponents who were also present in the State House. Similarly, to our other actions, once people were engaged, they stayed engaged. They kept showing up, costume or not.

“For the day of the final vote, we skipped the handmaids with the idea that we were finally taking off the costumes and using our voices to

fight for a future in which women had full agency over their health care decisions.” -The Womxn Project

We also engaged in traditional activities like phone calling and door knocking, but our ladder of engagement prioritized giving people a foundation of knowledge on the General Assembly that would encourage their involvement in the next election. We often hear that it takes asking a woman 7 times before she will consider running for office, but what about showing up to knock doors, or make phone calls on a campaign? How do we build those volunteers? The Womxn Project believes that when we open our volunteers’ eyes to the entire process of our government, they build a base of confidence and knowledge that empowers them to take on these next levels of action.

It is hard to pick a favorite action or moment from this legislative session. There were so many, but a couple stand out in terms of the unique role we played. We led the digital engagement and communications around the bill. We also led a significant field and organizing component of the campaign. Since we were primarily focusing on grassroots engagement, we were able to push the envelope more to maintain supporters’ interest.

There were many moments that demanded we call out specific legislators and when we did, we were able to keep up pressure on lawmakers to move the bill. We utilized a billboard truck and paid media to target lawmakers who had previously said they would support the bill but then backed out. We bird-dogged the Governor and various legislators in their districts or at public events. We organized a protest outside a Senate Democrats’ event. Nearly two hundred people showed up to urge legislators in attendance to let the bill out of committee for a vote. We made it clear that we would keep showing up in even larger numbers to push for passage.

CRR: What's next for Rhode Island and The Womxn Project? How do you hope to keep protecting the right to abortion in your state and what are some of the ways in which you hope to expand access to abortion for all?

TWP: The Womxn Project started as a collective in which our agenda and work was developed collaboratively in a group setting. Holding true to our founding principles, we are holding a meeting later in July to determine our next legislative goals. However, we do know that Rhode Island received an “F” rating for reproductive health care from NARAL Pro-Choice America because we are also suffering in terms of actual access to reproductive health care services, so that will possibly inform our plans.

We need to be prepared for any attacks on our rights next session, while also looking to advance legislation to increase access to the full range of reproductive care and eliminate current barriers to abortion. Rhode Island has only two abortion providers and both are located in a single county. Rhode Islanders are already traveling out of state for their care. We are hoping to develop an agenda based on reproductive justice principles regarding our right to prevent pregnancy, become parents when ready, to seek a safe abortion when we need to end a pregnancy, continue and foster a healthy pregnancy and raise our children with safety and dignity. We are looking at ways to increase abortion access here in our state while working in solidarity with other groups on key policies to meet the needs of all womxn and families.

RESOURCES

Proactive Policy Resources for State Legislators and Advocates

- [2019 Midyear Report: Gaining Ground](#); National Institute for Reproductive Health
- [State Policy Trends at Mid-Year 2019: States Race to Ban or Protect Abortion](#); Guttmacher Institute
- [TelAbortion: evaluation of a direct to patient telemedicine abortion service in the United States](#); a paper demonstrating the safety, efficacy, and acceptability of Gynuity Health Project's TelAbortion study