

Northwest Reproductive Freedom Network: Working Together to Protect and Promote Women's Rights

by Lisa Beyl

Editor's Note: In the last year, Western States Center has begun work with new initiatives designed to strengthen organizing for reproductive rights in vulnerable communities. In addition to the Reproductive Freedom Network profiled here, the Center did a set of trainings with the New Partners Initiative of the Ms. Foundation for Women. New Partners brings together groups affected by the narrowing of access to reproductive health services, particularly young women, women of color, LGBT communities, and allies in social services and education settings. Look for CSTI workshops highlighting these new initiatives.

"The Reproductive Freedom Network excels at building community. The sexuality education workgroup has connected me with many dynamic women. Together, we have created a successful regional movement."

— Raquel Castellanos Miller
*Blue Mountain Clinic
Montana*

Few subjects elicit as much fervor and even hysteria as reproductive freedom, which continues to be under attack throughout the country. In 2000, staff attorneys at the Northwest Women's Law Center noticed that anti-choice activists were sharing strategies to push their agenda throughout the Northwest.

A series of calls from doctors and advocates from different Northwest states alerted us to the spread of "conscience clauses." These measures allow religiously affiliated health care providers and insurers to "opt out" of providing or paying for standard reproductive health services for women. As hospital mergers between secular and religious hospitals increase, successful implementation of "conscience clauses" threatens to dramatically erode women's access to legal medical services such as birth control, emergency contraception and abortion. Virtually identical "conscience clause" proposals surfaced in coastal Oregon, rural Washington and in the Idaho State Legislature. The anti-choice movement was clearly communicating across state lines and using this regional dialogue to further a radical, anti-woman agenda. It was time to fight back.

The Birth of the RFN

The Northwest Reproductive Freedom Network (RFN) links pro-choice activists and providers in rural and geographically-isolated areas of Alaska,

Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Washington. In 2001, the Northwest Women's Law Center launched the RFN with funding from the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation and the Educational Foundation of America. Aimed at reducing the sense of isolation and enhancing communication among pro-choice organizations and individuals in our large and diverse region, the RFN allows members to connect via an e-mail list serve and periodic telephone conferences. In just a short time, the RFN has become an active and vibrant network of more than 90 members representing a wide spectrum of progressive organizations spread among the five states. By stimulating cross-state relationships the network functions as a facilitator of communication, a forum for exploring political and legal strategies, and a resource for legal and technical assistance. Members of the RFN share challenges in protecting and advancing reproductive rights and health, and work together to develop innovative responses.

Issues and Action

In November, 2002, the first Reproductive Freedom Network conference brought together over 50 women from rural and underserved areas of the Northwest. Over the course of two days of panel presentations and group discussion, participants moved from identifying challenges to developing solutions.

Central to the vision of the RFN is a commitment to build an inclusive movement. A training and strategy session dedicated to diversifying the reproductive rights movement kicked off the conference. Members' dedication to broadening the base of people working on and leading the fight for



reproductive freedom in the region informed discussions, strategy sessions and the formation of action plans.

The conference created collaborative working groups focused on two priority topics. The first will work to dispel the myth that abortion increases a woman's chances of developing breast cancer later in life. The National Cancer Institute recently updated their website to reflect the outcomes of the "Early Reproductive Events and Breast Cancer Conference" where the nation's foremost experts overwhelmingly agreed that earlier studies indicating a connection between abortion and breast cancer were flawed and that recent, larger studies prove that no link exists. RFN members shared that local papers in both Montana and Alaska had recently published opinion pieces "warning" women about the link between abortion and breast cancer. This workgroup is developing a coordinated media strategy to reach deep into isolated communities.

The focus of a second working group is on empowering youth to demand comprehensive and medically accurate sex education. This strategy includes engaging high school students in resisting abstinence-only education and funding and demanding accurate information. Participants have shared organizing and outreach techniques and are in the process of developing an on-line bulletin

board that will allow sexuality educators and youth to communicate. Several member organizations have mobilized high school students around a proposed Medically Accurate Sexuality Education bill in Washington state, and the group plans to launch a coordinated approach in time for next year's legislative sessions throughout the Northwest. The group is also planning a collaborative media campaign. Members have also shared model legislation that would mandate comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education in public schools. Advocates agree that this coordination will help to build a unified movement.

In a time when the federal government is enacting regressive national policies that sacrifice women's rights, each additional assault on reproductive rights underscores the importance of state-based advocacy. National policymaking alone cannot address the assaults on reproductive rights, although we continue to depend on and support national pro-choice organizations. Especially in the wake of the election of more anti-choice public officials, pro-choice advocacy in the Northwest states has become more crucial than ever. 🐾

For more information, please contact Lisa Beyl, Reproductive Freedom Network Coordinator for the Northwest Women's Law Center at (206) 682-9552, ext. 110 or lbeyl@nwwlc.org.

"Participating in the RFN has been a wonderful networking opportunity. I feel so much more connected. Sharing legislative strategies and support with like-minded advocates has made such a difference this session. We're celebrating our defeat of HB 202, a bill that could have elevated fetal rights over women's health, as a shared victory in the Northwest."

**– Lee Flinn
Idaho Women's
Network**

Northwest Women's Law Center

Advancing Legal Rights for Women

THE NORTHWEST WOMEN'S LAW CENTER

Founded in 1978 by women attorneys and activists, the Law Center uses litigation, education and legislative strategies to advance women's rights. We provide comprehensive legal information and referrals to more than 6,000 women and men each year. Unique in the country in both the breadth of issues and variety of strategies used, we are the only women's legal rights organization serving women in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington. The Law Center is committed to maintaining and improving our alliances with other organizations working on shared issues.

In the pro-choice arena, the Law Center has played a significant role throughout the region. Over the last 20 years, reproductive freedom and women's health successes have included: obtaining the first statewide injunction issued anywhere in the country against Operation Rescue (WA and then OR); striking down Montana's felony sodomy statute; representing women prisoners in both Alaska and Washington in their efforts to obtain equitable incarceration conditions including access to health care; and successfully advocating for a rule to compel health plans providing prescription drug coverage to include contraception in Washington. The Law Center is a co-founder of the Community Abortion Information and Resource (CAIR) Project, a fund that provides assistance and financial support to women seeking abortions in the Northwest. Most recently, the Law Center won legislation that requires hospital emergency rooms in Washington State to inform and provide victims of sexual assault with emergency contraception.