

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE, by Dani Vilella

Good morning. As Margot mentioned, my name is Dani Vilella, and I am the West Michigan Field Organizer for Planned Parenthood Affiliates and Advocates of Michigan. I would like to start out by thanking you all for inviting me here today. As you can imagine, I do not get invited to speak from a pulpit very often. There are only a handful of congregations in West Michigan that would do a service like this and I am very proud to be able to take part in it. I am also proud to be a part of the first generation born into a world where abortion and birth control was legal and available and fortunate to be born to a woman who made sure that I knew it.

This morning we have heard stories from women about their personal experiences navigating the ever-changing playing field that is women's rights. Historically, it seems that as soon as we finally gain access to a long overdue right, attacks begin to chip away at it, restrict it, and if possible, revoke it. We have seen this in its most drastic form in the fight for abortion rights. Immediately after the Roe v Wade decision 41 years ago, legislative and legal attacks began, giving us the Hyde and Holmes Amendments only a few years later and it has continued with nearly no relief since.

Even though attacks have been continuous, the last three years have presented those of us working to maintain and expand reproductive choices for women with unprecedented challenges. In 2011, states passed 92 laws restricting abortion access, nearly triple the previous record of 24 in 2005. It was the beginning of a War on Women. Continuing through 2012, on both the state and federal level, we faced 20 week abortion bans, a redefining of rape, forced transvaginal ultrasounds, TRAP regulations designed to force abortion providers to adhere to unnecessary building codes, and most egregious, personhood initiatives which grant full rights of citizenship from the moment of conception.

Here in Michigan we fought against House Bill 5711, omnibus legislation that included defunding, procedure bans, telemedicine bans, biased coercion laws, rights of conscience acts, and more. This bill would have required fetal remains from abortion procedures to be buried or cremated by funeral homes. It would have closed nearly all of the abortion providers in the state by requiring that they all become licensed outpatient surgical facilities, regardless of the fact that most abortions are medication induced. While the bill passed (during the most absurd lame duck session I have ever seen) we successfully fought to strip it of its teeth, resulting in no providers having to close their doors. In addition to 5711, we saw the introduction of the truly ridiculous – Right to Life License plates, million dollar insurance policies for physicians who provide abortions, and even a fetal tax exemption was introduced. By the way, Michigan got rid of its child tax exemption several years ago, but an exemption for fetuses was brought into legislative committee!

The beginning of 2013 was much quieter, mainly because the Mi legislature was fighting over Medicaid Expansion – possibly the single most important state law passed in my lifetime to ensure women's access to health care. We finally passed it – better late than never I suppose. And yet again the Michigan legislature chose to end its year by restricting women's rights. Late in 2013, a law was passed (as I know many of you are aware) that will prevent abortion coverage in both Marketplace and employer insurance plans. This bill has no exceptions for rape, incest or the health of the woman. It is based upon

a falsehood that women will be able to buy an “abortion rider” – these riders do not exist and there is no indication from insurance companies that they ever will. Additionally, the law has a \$10,000 fine for any doctor who bills an insurance company for an abortion procedure if the insurer decides that the procedure does not fit the exemption for the life of the woman allowed in the law. In 2012, the governor vetoed this same piece of legislation and Right to Life decided that wasn’t acceptable. So they held a petition campaign, gathering signatures from less than 4% of the population to bypass the governor and introduce legislation directly to lawmakers. They called it the No Taxes for Abortion Act – despite the fact that the Affordable Care Act already separates out any abortion coverage from tax subsidies AND the fact that employer insurance premiums do not in any way come from tax payer dollars. Right to Life wrote and funded it and the legislature passed it. It is veto proof. Progressive organizations are working now to determine how best to fight this bill. Planned Parenthood is currently doing polling to find out if this it is feasible to do a ballot initiative to repeal this law. As the method that Right to Life used to pass this bill has only ever been tried 4 times, our path to defeating it is new territory for us and not entirely clear, but we are determined to fight. I know many of you are anxious to take action on this issue and I want to urge you to sign up for our action alert list at mipannedparenthood.org, which will keep you up-to-date and in the loop as our decision making process moves forward. We will know much more in the next week or so.

While the abortion coverage ban is certainly important, I don’t want to end my time today without mentioning the other battles we are facing – both locally and federally. Here in Muskegon, as you well know, the ACLU of Michigan is suing the US Conference of Catholic Bishop because Mercy Health nearly let a woman die rather than provide her with accurate medical information about ending her pregnancy in order to adhere to USCCB policies. At the federal level we are also facing legal challenges – first the Supreme Court has agreed to hear the cases of two private employers who wish to eliminate birth control coverage for their employees. Many of you may have heard that Hobby Lobby is one of these and while the owners may be religious – the sale of knick knacks and craft supplies for profit certainly does not qualify it as a religious institution. In addition to that case, the Supreme Court recently issued a temporary decision that allows certain types of religious employers to refuse birth control coverage as well – in opposition to the laws of the Affordable Care Act. The order will remain in place until the federal government officially responds to the Court.

While 2011 and 2012 were focused on legislation, it seems that 2013 and 2014 will be focused on legal challenges. As soon as we increased women’s access to birth control and other reproductive health care through the Affordable Care Act, our opposition began fighting it any way that they could. We have staved off the majority of these attacks but they have won small victories and each victory is another crack in the foundation of women’s reproductive rights. They will to continue attack and they will continue to win if we do not continue to fight and fight hard. It is particularly during this time of year, when we stop to remember the important victory of *Roe v Wade*, that we must also recommit to our fight for reproductive justice in all its forms – commit to battling legislation, to educating our lawmakers and telling them what we think, to speaking out proudly about our stance on these issues, and, maybe most importantly, committing to elect strong progressive candidates who will not only fight to keep the rights we have but work to move those rights forward in a positive and proactive way