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TOP STORY

Planned Parenthood president sends message during visit: 'We're pushing forward' in the South

By Mary Katherine Wildeman mkwildeman@postandcourier.com Apr 18, 2018 Updated Apr 19, 2018



President of Planned Parenthood Cecile Richards celebrates the opening of the Planned Parenthood in West Ashley Wednesday, April 18, 2018. Grace Beahm Alford/ Staff

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In her last event of its kind after 12 years as president of Planned Parenthood, Cecile Richards told a crowd of her Southern supporters that the organization's opening of a clinic that offers abortions in Charleston for the first time is "monumental."

It is important to guarantee access to reproductive health care, Richards said, otherwise it "doesn't mean anything to have a right on paper."

Richards came to Charleston on Wednesday afternoon to celebrate the ribbon-cutting of Planned Parenthood's new clinic with its donors, national leadership and facility staff.

Commuters on Ashley River Road may have noticed the sign outside the baby blue building change from "Charleston Women's Medical Center" to "Planned Parenthood." Though the exterior of the building and the sign-waving protesters outside remain familiar, the clinic is almost unrecognizable inside, staff said.

The building underwent major renovations in recent months to house Planned Parenthood's expanded clinic. The office has been accepting patients since the beginning of the year. Richards painted the opening as a sign of the organization's growth in the South, and said investing in Southern states has been one of Planned Parenthood's most important advancements in the past decade.

"We're sending a message to politicians all across this state that we are unstoppable," she said. "This health center is proof that we're not just fighting back, we're pushing forward."

Planned Parenthood stated in its most recent annual report that it provided services to 2.4 million men and women across the country. It administered 321,384 abortions in 2016, according to that report.

In the past year, Planned Parenthood has faced national and state-level threats to its funding. In South Carolina, legislators most recently attempted to pass a "personhood" bill, which would have defined a person as a fertilized human egg. The Post and



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Courier reported the proposal has almost no chance of passing this year, but could be considered next year.

President of Planned Parenthood Cecile Richards celebrates the opening of the Planned Parenthood in West Ashley Wednesday, April 18, 2018. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

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On the federal level, an attempt to remove Planned Parenthood's funding failed last year. Republicans hoped to wrap a provision making the organization ineligible for those monies into proposed repeals of the Affordable Care Act.

A Congressional Budget Office report predicted the move would result in thousands more births and fewer available women's health services to under-served communities.

Gov. Henry McMaster issued an executive order in August ending public funding to health care providers that have affiliations with abortion clinics.

"Every time an organization like Planned Parenthood gains any sort of foothold in one of our communities, it's a problem," a spokesman for his office said Wednesday. "That's why Gov. McMaster has fought to make sure no taxpayer money will ever again go to an abortion provider or any organization that affiliates with one."

Federal law does not allow for public money to go toward abortions, except in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's life is in danger. Planned Parenthood's state funding takes the form of reimbursements through Medicaid.

Rep. James Smith, D-Charleston and a candidate for the governor's office, attended the event as a supporter of Planned Parenthood. He said McMaster sent the executive order out "in order to use people's fears or prejudices to generate support for himself." He vowed to veto any personhood legislation if he becomes governor.

The state's Medicaid agency's payments for Planned Parenthood's services have increased, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. They reimbursed for \$72,867 in the 2016 fiscal year and \$82,124 last year.

Planned Parenthood has expanded what it offers in Charleston and across the country. Vasectomies will soon be available in Charleston. Richards pointed to transgender hormone therapy as one of its newest and most popular services.

In an interview with The Post and Courier, Richards was confident about where she is leaving the organization. She said while she is worried about actions from state legislatures and the Supreme Court vacancy, support for Planned Parenthood has never been better.

She cited a recent Fox News poll that found 58 percent of Americans support Planned Parenthood, while 49 percent have a positive view of the National Rifle Association.

"I don't think the politics of this president or this Congress reflect where the American people are," she said.

The Kaiser Family Foundation reported last year three-quarters of Americans support continued federal funding for Planned Parenthood's services.

Richards acknowledged the politics of the moment are "enormously unsettled," but said she thinks that has little to do with reproductive rights.

Holly Gatling, executive director of South Carolina Citizens for Life, accused Planned Parenthood of using abortion as a fundraising tactic, calling the group the "big box store of the abortion industry." Gatling's group was incorporated in 1974 and is an affiliate of the National Right to Life Committee.

"Under the direction of Cecile Richards, Planned Parenthood began closing small, superfluous clinics that did not offer abortion, the income-producing product, and requiring all its affiliates to kill unborn children," Gatling said. "That is exactly what is happening in Charleston with Planned Parenthood's Abortion Empire."

While legislators continue to push for laws limiting abortion and removing funding from the group, the crowd Wednesday afternoon was assured Planned Parenthood is pumping the gas pedal on expanding its presence in the state.

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