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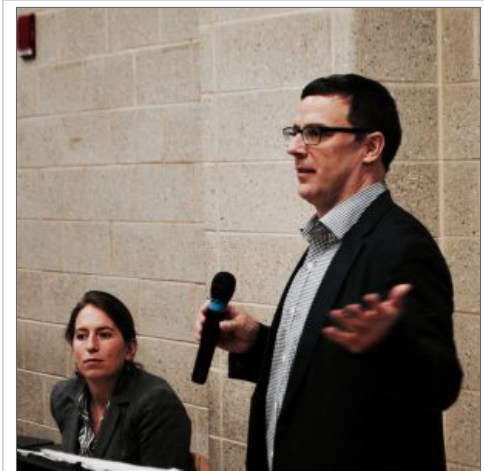
Pro-Choice advocates prepare to defend reproductive rights in RI

By Steve Ahlquist on December 1, 2016

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"I have never been more proud to say what I'm about to say," said **Craig O'Connor**, "I work for **Planned Parenthood**." As the director of public policy and government relations of **Rhode Island Planned Parenthood of Southern New England**, the job has fallen on O'Connor to guide the local chapter of the 100 year old reproductive rights institution through what may be its most challenging time: the Trump/Pence years. The years to come will not be about advancing the cause of reproductive and health care rights, it will be about fighting to preserve the gains already made.



Craig O'Connor

O'Connor made one thing very clear at the outset. "We're not going anywhere. Our doors stay open. We've been here a hundred years, we're going to be here another 100 years, no matter what they throw our way."

O'Connor was addressing a crowd of over 150 people, mostly women, but also many men who are concerned about the effects overturning **Roe v. Wade**, defunding Planned Parenthood and repealing Obamacare might have on the health and safety of poorest and most vulnerable.

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2016-11-30 Reproductive Rights 01 Craig O'Connor



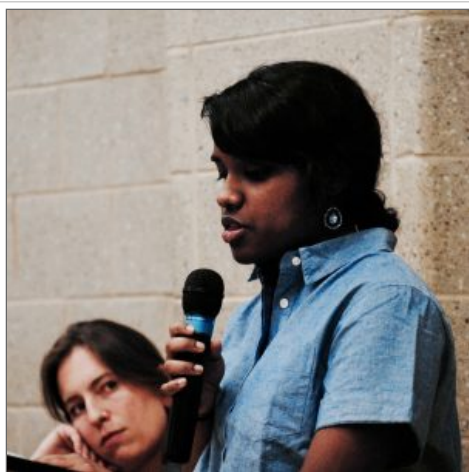
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The **Rhode Island Constitution** does not protect the right to abortion. Article 1, Section 2 includes the sentence, "Nothing in this section shall be construed to grant or secure any right relating to abortion or the funding thereof."

Rhode Island is a notoriously anti-choice state. **NARAL** recently gave the state an F rating, the same as Texas. Planned Parenthood estimates that only 30 percent of the the **General Assembly** is reliably pro-choice. Yet polls show that Rhode Islanders, even Catholic Rhode Islanders, overwhelmingly support reproductive rights. There is a disconnect there that is difficult to diagnose.



Gopika Krishna

Gopika Krishna is a 4th year medical student at Brown and a member of **Medical Students for Choice**. When she graduates in a few months, she plans to be an abortion provider. "What history has shown us, time and time again, is that these moments, when abortion is restricted even more than they normally are, it disproportionately affects poor women and women of color," said Krishna. "Those who have the means will be able to travel to access birth control of their choice and to parent in a safe environment."

Krishna showed that reproductive justice is intimately related to social and economic justice. Krishna listed [SisterSong's](#) three core reproductive justice principles, developed since 1997 by women of color working:

Decide if and when she will have a baby and the conditions under which she will give birth

Decide if she will not have a baby and her options for preventing or ending a pregnancy

Parent the children she already has with the necessary social supports in safe environments and healthy communities, and without fear of violence from individuals or the government

What are these rights worth, ponders Krishna, when maternal mortality has been *increasing* in our country for the past thirty years? When black women are four times as likely to die from complications related to pregnancy than white women? When undocumented women are excluded from Medicaid policies and have little to no access to prenatal care? When states like Tennessee have jailed pregnant women with a... issues, rather than offer treatment? What does it mean to parent in a safe and environment when, as of this morning, 875 people were shot and killed by pol alone?

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2016-11-30 Reproductive Rights 02 Gopika Krishna



Meghan Kallman has a doctorate in sociology, was recently elected to the **Pawtucket City Council**, and, most impressively, has written for **RI Future**. Kallman began by linking the issues of climate change and reproductive rights. “When we talk about reproduction and climate change together the conversation has historically been limited, and usually it emerged as conversations about population,” said Kallman, “What that has historically looked like is in the context of finger pointing at women, usually poor women, often women of color, for exercising their human right to bear children.”



Meghan Kallman

Kallman, who co-founded **Conceivable Future**, which seeks to bring “awareness to the threat climate change poses to reproductive justice” said that in the course of that work, “I can’t tell you how many times we’ve been approached by people advocating population control policies, which I find to be pretty brutal.”

“They make this their main issue. They call it population stabilization, population control and they are almost always comprised of well educated, middle class, frequently white people working to curtail other people’s fertility and blaming them for much of the problems.” As an example, Kallman suggests looking up **Californians for Population Stabilization**.

“The use of the topic of population to scapegoat the poor or another country’s fraught issue with a lot of history. It turns the idea of reproductive choice sovereignty into a cudgel that blames the most vulnerable people instead of the powerful,” said Kallman.

Climate change activism is often centered around our obligation to our children generations. But as the terrible reality of climate change becomes more clear, the idea of bearing the next generation becomes difficult to resolve... Nobody makes decisions freely in the face of so much injustice.”

Kallman also mentioned police violence and Black Lives Matter, citing the work of **Todd** and **Sabrina Joyce Stevens**, two African-American women who wrote

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Medium about how it feels futile to have a child in an era of state violence.

"Nobody makes reproductive choices freely in the face of so many dangers."

2016-11-30 Reproductive Rights 03 Meghan Kallman



So what's next for reproductive rights in Rhode Island? Planned Parenthood activists **Brittany Huffman** and **Tiara Mack** outlined some ideas. First, we need to contact our legislators in the General Assembly and let them know about the importance of preserving reproductive rights in the coming years. Communicating with your state representative and senator, holding their feet to the fire, is critically important.

People might also think about running for office themselves. A woman in the audience rose to speak about her frustration in seeing Representative **Arthur Corvese** running unopposed. Corvese is a reliable anti-choice and anti-LGBTQ vote. The woman wrote in her own name, rather than vote for Corvese. I thought to myself, how much more an effective vote that would have been if her name was on the ballot, challenging Corvese?

Gone is the time when we could rely on our government to protect our rights. Now it is up to us to take these issues into our own hands.

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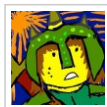
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Pro-Choice advocates prepare to defend reproductive rights in RI



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Steve Ahlquist is an award-winning journalist, writer, artist and founding member of the Humanists of Rhode Island, a non-profit group dedicated to reason, compassion, optimism, courage and action. The views expressed are his own and not necessarily those of any organization of which he is a member.

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"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." - Elie Weisel

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." - Desmond Tutu

"There comes a time when neutrality and laying low become dishonorable. If you're not in revolt, you're in cahoots. When this period and your name are mentioned, decades hence, your grandkids will look away in shame." - David Brooks

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