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The Wichita Beacon

Internal tensions preceded sweeping changes at closed Wichita abortion clinic

By Rose Conlon, 2 days ago



Wichita's largest abortion clinic remains closed more than a month after it stopped seeing patients, amid a [dramatic shakeup in leadership](#) and mass resignations by doctors and other key staff.

Trust Women's board — which initially estimated the closure would last [“days to maybe a couple weeks”](#) — said last week that the organization's recently-installed interim CEO had resigned and the board had hired a consulting firm to help it reopen later this summer.

In a Thursday email to KMWU, the board said it had appointed three interim co-medical directors and an interim director of finance.

“The Board is pleased with the progress we're making,” the email said.

But former employees, former board members and donors are raising questions about the current board's ability to run a high-volume abortion clinic that has long been a beacon of reproductive rights access and advocacy in a politically divided region.


Multiple sources said they think racial bias was a factor in the firing of five women of color.

Several donors told KMWU they have stopped giving Trust Women money because of the turmoil and lack of transparency.

“In my opinion, what has happened is very simple: The board wanted more power — so they took it,” said one former employee, who asked to remain anonymous because of a nondisclosure agreement that prohibits them from speaking about the clinic.

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Its closure means abortion access in Wichita now ends at 15 weeks of pregnancy, despite Kansas allowing abortions until 21 weeks and 6 days — forcing some patients to travel hours more than they would otherwise need to. The city's [other two abortion providers](#), Planned Parenthood and Aria Medical, only provide abortions until 15 weeks and 11 weeks of pregnancy, respectively.

“How did we lose abortion access in a place where it’s legal?” asked Jessica Wells-Hasan, a nonprofit leader in New York who served on Trust Women’s board from 2019 until last August, when she left due to a family illness. She said she’s speaking publicly because she’s concerned about the organization’s future.

“It’s such a lost opportunity,” she said. “How many other clinics are having to scramble because of this nonsense?”

Firings and resignations

In early April, Trust Women’s board fired the organization’s co-executive directors, Rebecca Tong and Schaunta James-Boyd, and installed then-board member Shukeyla Harrison as interim CEO.

Wells-Hasan and multiple others interviewed for this story said they were shocked by the move because they considered both to be effective and well-liked leaders.

Trust Women’s board declined to comment on the removal. Tong, James-Boyd and Harrison did not respond to requests for comment.

Harrison was one of two people who had joined Trust Women’s board less than a year before. She’s a doctoral student in leadership studies and an instructor at Kansas State University.

She does not appear to have prior experience in health care management or reproductive rights work, according to publicly available information and notes from her 2023 interview with the Trust Women’s board, which were shared with KMUW.

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Trust Women's board says the clinic will reopen to patients later this summer. (Rose Conlon/ KMUW)

In Harrison's first days as interim CEO, sources said she canceled group staff meetings and reminded current employees that they had signed NDAs with \$5,000 penalties for breaches.

Harrison then fired three other leaders — Trust Women's medical director, assistant medical director and advocacy director. They, along with the former co-executive directors, are all women of color.

Within weeks, at least 10 of 16 of the clinic's doctors resigned, according to [reporting by Rewire News Group](#), as did its communications director and development associate. One longtime board member quit in April, and another, Trust Women's then-board president, left in May.

"They isolated everybody. They got the pushy people out," said one of the former employees. "Now, they're leveraging fear and isolation in order to proceed with what they want to do."

"There's a grave injustice here," the other former employee said, "for staff, for patients and for the state of Kansas."

New board president

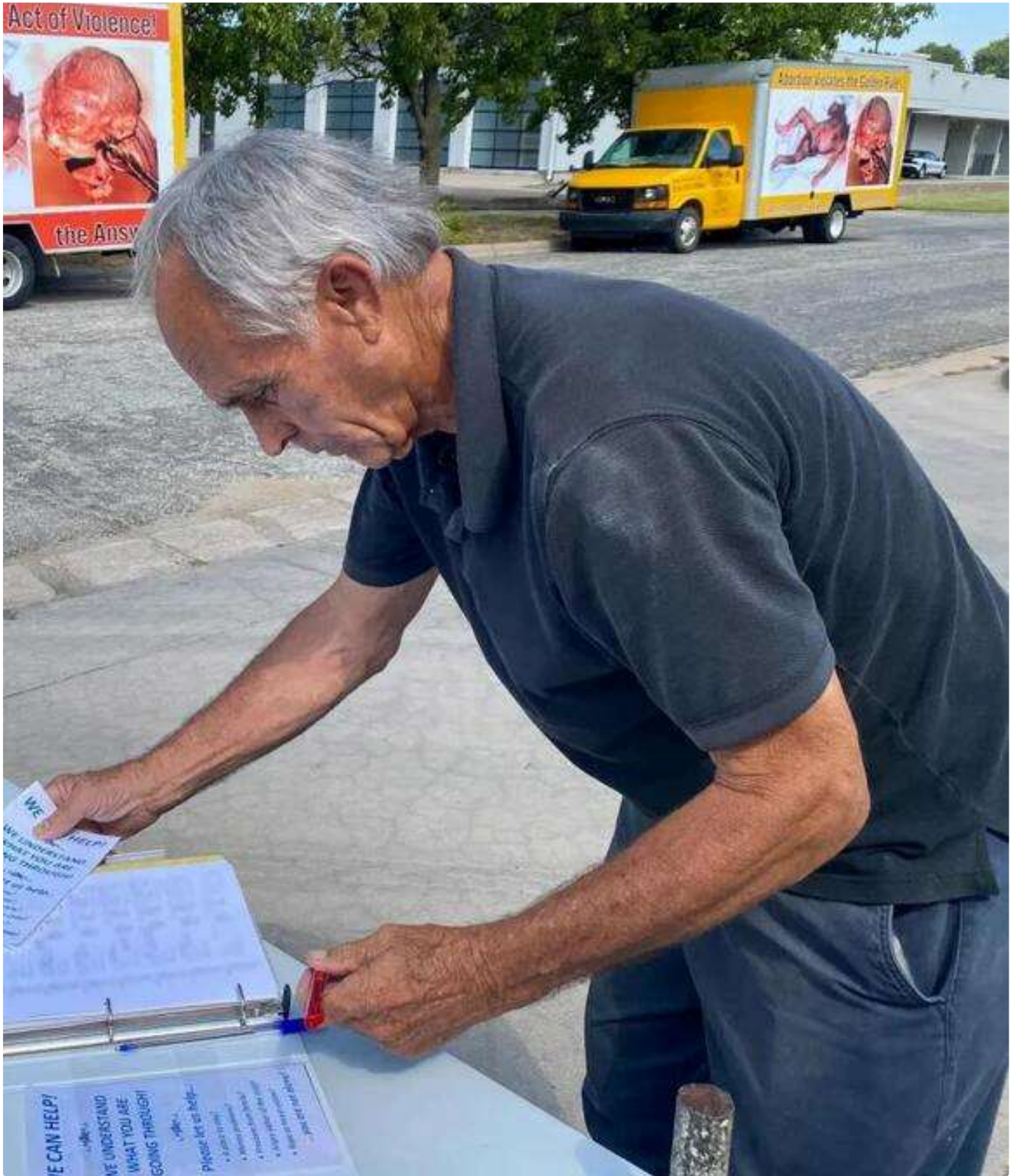
The resignations left just three people on Trust Women's board: Susan Edgerley, a retired journalist in Oregon; Bruce Price, a neurologist in Massachusetts, and Sapphire Garcia, a Wichita-based nonprofit leader. Garcia is the only current board member who has spoken publicly about the developments. Edgerley and Price did not respond to requests for comment.

Sources said Garcia — who joined the board when Harrison did, less than a year prior — was present when Harrison fired multiple staff members in April. Garcia became board president in mid-May, after the previous board president resigned.

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Multiple former employees raised concerns that the board's references to patient safety resembled arguments frequently made by anti-abortion groups, which have sought to shut down abortion clinics due to alleged safety concerns. News of Trust Women's closure prompted the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue to [call for a "major investigation"](#) into the clinic.

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Anti-abortion protesters have frequently protested outside Trust Women's Wichita clinic, including Mike Hagan in 2022. (Rose Conlon/ KMWU)

Garcia declined to speak for this story, but reiterated, in an emailed statement on behalf of the board, that they have partnered with the consulting firm Health Management Associates to support the clinic's reopening.

"Working with the Board and staff, we have met with a number of our funders, and we this week have appointed three interim co-medical directors who are experienced in abortion care and an interim director of finance to prepare us for reopening and ensure our long-

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Past CEO troubles

Multiple sources said Trust Women's board was more involved in the organization's operations due to issues with its founder and former CEO, Julie Burkhart.

Burkhart opened Trust Women in 2013 in the same building where George Tiller, a longtime abortion provider, practiced until 2009, when he was assassinated at his church by an anti-abortion extremist. Burkhart, who had worked with Tiller, led Trust Women until 2021.

Trust Women's board voted to remove Burkhart amid complaints from staff about a negative workplace environment, according to multiple sources and board minutes reviewed by KMWU. Burkhart declined to comment on the circumstances surrounding her departure.

The board chose James-Boyd and Tong as interim co-executive directors and then made their positions permanent within a year. Tong had been Trust Women's development director for seven years; James-Boyd had spent 19 years at another Wichita health clinic, most recently as its executive director.

Wells-Hasan was one of the board members who voted for Burkhart's removal. She characterized that leadership change as necessary — but said it led the board to be more involved in Trust Women's operations.

"Because of the fact that there were people who felt harmed under Julie, the board did not want to be hands-off," she said.

She also thinks the board's experience removing Burkhart could have informed its decision to remove Tong and James-Boyd.

"(The board) had gone through that process," she said, "and therefore that meant that they knew how to do it."

Trust Women expands

Trust Women's Wichita and Oklahoma City clinics faced a swell of patient demand in 2021 when Texas banned most abortions after six weeks. Demand further exploded the following year when Roe was overturned and Wichita became the nearest place to get an abortion for large swaths of the South and Midwest.

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With Tong and James-Boyd at the helm, Trust Women expanded capacity at the Wichita clinic to meet burgeoning demand from patients in nearby states. When the Oklahoma City clinic could no longer legally provide abortions, they pivoted to providing gender-affirming care, medication-assisted treatment for substance use disorders, and STI testing and treatment.

But in early 2023, Wells-Hasan said that some members of Trust Women's then all-white board began to discuss creating a new position to oversee Tong and James-Boyd.

"They had this thing in their head — 'We need to have someone above Rebecca and Schaunta,'" Wells-Hasan recalled.

She thought some board members still considered Tong and James-Boyd to be stopgap leaders, despite them being made permanent co-executives a year earlier. She said she also wondered whether implicit bias played a role.

"I don't know if there was subtle racism coming into play," she said.

"The person who led this nonprofit before was a white woman who wears blazers," she added. "Rebecca and Schaunta don't look like that ... and I, personally, felt like there was resistance to them being permanent leadership."

Wells-Hasan said she disagreed — and said so during board meetings — because she thought Tong and James-Boyd were skilled leaders due to her own observations, performance evaluations by the board, and positive feedback from staff, donors and community partners.

"They were doing great in that role. There was no reason to have anyone above them," she said. "I put my foot down as hard as I could — like, literally, give me a reason."

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Only around one-third of the women who get abortions in Kansas are white and non-Hispanic, but in early 2023, Trust Women's board was entirely white. Four of its five members lived in coastal cities far from Kansas.

Shortly after the board began discussing hiring someone to oversee Tong and James-Boyd, it moved to add two new board members, Harrison and Garcia, both women of color.

Harrison administers a scholarship program funded by current board member Susan Edgerley's family at K-State. Board minutes reviewed by KMUW show that Edgerley recommended Harrison for the board.

Garcia is the founder and executive director of the Kansas Birth Justice Society, a Wichita-based nonprofit that provides doula services and lactation consulting to Black and brown mothers.

Emerging tensions

Tensions began growing between Trust Women's former co-executives and its board last July, when Tong and James-Boyd asked for significant raises, according to multiple sources familiar with the situation and emails shared with KMUW. The emails show that Tong was making \$100,000 and James-Boyd was making \$125,000 in annual base compensation, and both asked for \$60,000 raises.

In the emails, Tong and James-Boyd said that they had shepherded the clinic through a period of unprecedented growth and were on pace to serve 70% more patients than the year prior. In the year since Roe fell, they'd added at least 16 new clinical staff positions, three administrative positions and grew the clinic's team of contract doctors to 18.

Wells-Hasan said Tong and James-Boyd's requests for raises seemed reasonable to her because of their success in their roles and the risk they assumed as public-facing leaders of an abortion clinic in a politically divided area.

"(This) is a job where you can get shot," she said, "and if someone is willing to do that job, and they do it well, then you reward them equitably."

Just days after the request, a suitcase left on Trust Women's property prompted a [large response](#) by the FBI and local law enforcement, before it was deemed to not present a security threat.

Donor fallout

Several of Trust Women's donors said they were surprised by the upheaval and uncertain whether they will continue to support the organization.

That includes the Roe Fund in Oklahoma, which gives Trust Women quarterly block grants to help pay medical expenses for Oklahomans traveling to Wichita to get abortions. President Nancy Coryell said the fund's board decided on Wednesday that it will not send any more money until Trust Women reopens and the fund learns more about its new leaders.

Christy Pennoyer is director of the William C. Bullitt Foundation, a longtime funder that typically gives Trust Women around \$30,000 per year. She said she first learned about the turmoil through news reports. She said the foundation did not receive any communication from Trust Women's new leadership about the changes or the closure.

"When something big happens like this, they should absolutely tell the funders what's going on," Pennoyer said, adding that it's unclear whether the foundation will renew its regular grant to the clinic this fall.

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This story was originally published by the Kansas News Service.

The post [Internal tensions preceded sweeping changes at closed Wichita abortion clinic](#) appeared first on [The Beacon](#).



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Susan Miller 47m ago
When do many get fired and the 10 of 16 doctors quit.Add the NDA's.... something real fishy is going on there, For years they've been allowed to cover up the truth about a bortion risks, sale of dead baby's and body parts... the list goes on.

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Bob Waters 5h ago
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