

2009 SPAN Award Nomination

Planned Parenthood Minnesota, North Dakota, South
Program nominated: North Dakota Public Affairs

Since 2005, Planned Parenthood Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota (PPMNS) has maintained a vital presence in North Dakota and has served as an essential advocate and leader on a public policy agenda that promotes and defends reproductive rights and freedom. PPMNS' North Dakota program has made remarkable strides in just two legislative sessions, 2007 and 2009. We have defeated anti-choice bills, mediated compromises to water down bills, built a grassroots base, established coalitions with other organizations, and cultivated allies in the legislature, all in the face of intense political opposition and isolation. Over the course of our four years in North Dakota, PPMNS has established strong relationships with other progressive organizations as well as the state's only abortion provider and has built one of the largest lists of progressive supporters in the state. Moreover, we have formed the PPMNS North Dakota Advisory Committee comprised of state-wide community leaders who play a central role in building the case for reproductive rights and act as our ambassadors in the state. A genuine threat to our work in the state is a strong, well organized, and religiously-based anti choice movement that creates misperceptions about Planned Parenthood's mission and work. This is exemplified in June 10th 2009 New York Times article suggesting the Kansas Coalition for Life may focus efforts on North Dakota.

The political climate in North Dakota is conservative and isolated in nature. A strong bi-partisan majority of both the North Dakota House and Senate oppose reproductive health and freedom, as does the Republican Governor John Hoeven. The current make up of the North Dakota Senate is 26 Republican, 21 Democrat and the House is 61 Republican, 33 Democrat. The ND legislature convenes every other year and the session is limited to 80 legislative days. The combination of the lack of family planning funding and anti-choice laws have earned North Dakota an "F" from NARAL Pro-Choice America and created insurmountable barriers to reproductive health care and services for those who need it most: uninsured and underinsured women and teens.

House bill 1572 was a bill backed by national activist group's intent on making North Dakota the epicenter of a heated national debate. The bill stated "it is the intent of the legislative assembly that an individual, a person... or a human being includes any organism with the genome of homo sapiens". This bill mirrored fetal personhood bills similar to the ballot measure in Colorado in 2008 and Montana this year. HB 1572 would have banned abortion in the state and the wide sweeping consequences could ban birth control and in vitro fertilization as there would be a real risk of prosecution against the doctor. This extreme and dangerous bill cleared the House of Representatives 51-41. The House Majority leader favored HB 1572 and coordinated with 'PersonhoodUSA' to coordinate an outpouring of support rarely seen in Bismarck, North Dakota: the halls of the Capital filled with anti choice zealots passing out literature and demanding a yes vote. The momentum and organization of the HB 1572 supporters was a surprise not only to PPMNS but to all involved in women's health advocacy.

In order to defeat this extreme and dangerous piece of legislation that had significant momentum it was imperative PPMNS design and implement a layered and multifaceted campaign. PPMNS, as the only organization working strictly on issues of reproductive health and freedom in the state of North Dakota seized the opportunity to lead the effort. PPMNS worked closely with attorneys from PPFA and the Center for Reproductive Rights to create detailed documentation as to the sweeping impacts this bill would have not only on reproductive health but also across hundreds of North Dakota laws. We partnered with the Red River Women's Clinic, North Dakota's only abortion provider, to ensure they were an active part of the strategic process. PPMNS coordinated the coalition's strategy on all fronts including messaging, media and testimony. Without the strong strategic input and leadership PPMNS demonstrated during the 2009 legislative session it likely HB 1572 would have passed both bodies. There is no other organization in the state with the skills, knowledge, experience, and ability to be a champion for women's reproductive health care.

PPMNS labored to coordinate the testimonial line up to appear in front of Senate Judiciary Committee. We prepared members of the medical, religious, legal, and women's rights communities to effectively present their perspectives. Our North Dakota Advisory Committee (NDAC) members aided in securing two of the states premier In Vitro Doctors whose testimony at the end of the day weighed the most heavily with the committee members. The NDAC also networked within their legislative district to dispatch personal messages to legislators demanding the bill be defeated. PPMNS worked personally with key Senate Judiciary Committee members to craft arguments powerful enough to swap all three anti choice committee members. The powerful and balanced testimonies lead to a unanimous "Do Not Pass" recommendation from the Senate Judiciary Committee

PPMNS not only worked with the grasstops but we had a strong grassroots effort as well. This work included a Live Action Camp focusing in on the sweeping consequences of HB 1572 and the personal activism individuals could do to make their voices heard. Participants wrote personalized letters to their district representatives as well as drafted letters to the editors. PPMNS utilized an on-line petition against the "Personhood" bill. The petition allowed participants to sign a petition which was then printed by legislative district and hand delivered to legislators at the Capital. The petition was very successful in a variety of ways. Firstly, it gave rural participants the ability to be an "active" part of the pro choice movement which can be difficult to achieve a large (land size) rural state. And secondly the petition grew our deliverable e-mail list of supporters in the state by one-eight in just over one month.

Our work played out not only behind the doors of the Capital but largely in print across the state. PPMNS secured an editorial board meeting with the states largest media outlet. This meeting lead to the Fargo Forum's editorial against HB 1572 and used all the arguments PPMNS laid out. Other city papers also took stands against the bill. PPMNS was able to call to action our supporters across the state and get letters submitted to papers across the state.

The messaging and grassroots efforts of PPMNS were successful and ultimately defeated HB 1572 in the Senate with a 16-29 vote. We know that national anti choice groups have found a spokesman at the North Dakota legislature, Representative Dan Ruby, and are using the 2010 interim to build there forces. With a NARAL rating of “F” for women’s health and a Guttmacher ranking of 50th our fear is that our opponents will attempt to seize North Dakota as the next battle ground state over reproductive freedom. In four years PPMNS has not only begun a public policy program in the state of North Dakota but we have built it to a level of high regard and respect. As we move into our third session we have a the grassroots, the grasstops, the coalitions, and the legislative relationships to defend women’s reproductive freedom unseen in North Dakotas past.