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FREE SPEAKS

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Legislative Session: Cause for Celebration *by Margaret Chapman, Executive Director*

Picture it: It's March 10th, 2007 at 11:30 p.m. under the dome of the West Virginia State Capitol. It's the last night of legislative session and not a single piece of anti-choice legislation has passed. 11:45- waiting and still wondering if the anti-choice contingent would engage in maneuvering to achieve a victory, as they'd been disappointed by the Legislature thus far. 12:00- and nothing! When the gavel fell at midnight, it was official: we had not only defeated every anti-choice bill, but we succeeded in getting a million dollars for family planning services! By 12:15, I was hugging a joyous Delegate Bobbi Hatfield in celebration.

The openness of the new leadership in the House combined with a growing disdain for the tactics of our counterparts and a concerted lobby effort by WV FREE and allies made the 2007 legislative session one for the history books. While over 50 anti-choice bills were introduced, only two had momentum. One was the perennial parental notification legislation, House Bill 3128 and Senate Bill 544. As in previous years, we pulled out all the stops to defeat this extreme legislation which would have practically eliminated the right to choose for young women in West Virginia and put doctors in prison. For the fourth consecutive year, we successfully defeated both versions of the legislation.

And, for the second year in a row, West Virginians for Life pushed hard for an unconstitutional bill that would strip West Virginia's poorest women of the right to access abortion care. (Read 'Medicaid' article below for more information.)

When not fighting changes to the parental notification statute and Medicaid funding law, WV FREE lobbyists worked to secure \$1 million in funding for West Virginia's Department of Health and Human Resources Family Planning Program. This small but important program provides preventive and reproductive medical care to help women plan and space their pregnancies and avoid mistimed, unwanted or unintended pregnancies. This reduces the number of abortion, lowers the rate of sexually transmitted diseases and significantly improves the health of women, children and families.

As evidenced again this legislative session, the choice community continues to grow in stature. But there is still much work to be done. WE NEED YOU! West Virginia's policymakers need to continue to feel the presence of WV FREE members -- from reasonable folk who support women's right to access basic reproductive health care. If we hope to see more victories, pro-choice politicians must have all the backing we can give them. We need a more engaged membership to bolster our grassroots network around the state. If you're interested in being part of a WV FREE chapter in your community, please give me a call at 304-342-9188. With your support, we'll make sure that all West Virginians can continue to make private and personal health care decisions.

Yours for choice and justice,

Medicaid & Reproductive Health Care: A Matter of Justice

The West Virginia Supreme Court has already ruled that denying poor and low-income women funding for abortions violates the protections afforded them by the state Constitution (see *Women's Health Center v. Panepinto*). That ruling stated that singling out abortion for exclusion from government funded health care creates an unjust and discriminatory system in which poor and low-income women do not have the same freedom to make their own decisions as those with more economic resources or those who are covered by private insurance.

A ban on Medicaid funding of abortions will hurt the most disadvantaged women in West Virginia -- poor women, women of color, young women and rural women, who already have insufficient access to reproductive health care. These women deserve the same access to health care as those who are more fortunate. Every woman, regardless of her economic resources, should have the right to decide whether and when to have a child, to shape her own life and plan her future. Women need public support and public resources in order to exercise these rights, as well as the

right to care for their children with dignity.

Rather than placing further restrictions on abortion access, the legislature should do all that it can to facilitate the prevention of unintended pregnancy and ensure women's access to the full range of reproductive health care through an expanded Medicaid program.

Despite the success of the state Family Planning Program, many poor and low-income women in West Virginia are still going without vital preventative and reproductive medical care because the state has not requested a family planning expansion waiver from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid. In other states such waivers have increased access to vital services, while saving money for both the state and federal government.

During the legislative session, WV FREE began educating key legislators on the benefits of family planning coverage under Medicaid and urged West Virginia Medicaid officials to apply for a waiver from the federal government. We will continue to push for an expansion waiver and keep you informed.



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BALLOT ENCLOSED

WV FREE Celebrates the 34th Anniversary of Roe v. Wade



Clockwise from top left:
Pastors Rose Edington and Mel Hoover (aww!); WV House Judiciary Chairwoman Carrie Webster & daughter Katherine; WVU Students; Amy Weintraub, Honoree & Director of Covenant House; Grayson Dempsey, Keynote Speaker & President of Backline. (Special thanks to Sue Amos for photos.)