Last month, Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts (PPLM) was in the national spotlight in a whole new way – with a case before the United States Supreme Court.

On January 15, the Court heard oral argument in McCullen v. Coakley, a case challenging the constitutionality of our state’s buffer zone law, which provides a 35-foot protest-free area at the entrances to our health centers in Boston, Springfield, and Worcester.

While the legal question before the Justices is whether the law violates free speech rights, the right to access reproductive health care safely is what’s at stake.

This is the latest chapter in a long fight to protect patients and staff from aggressive and dangerous protests outside our health centers. PPLM’s commitment to resolving this public safety problem dates back to the 1980s, when we attempted to address the problem through a series of ineffective injunctions.

In 1994, an anti-abortion gunman murdered two staff members at PPLM and one other health center in Brookline - Shannon Lowney and Lee Anne Nichols – and injured multiple others. This tragic incident prompted the creation of the first statewide buffer zone legislation, passed in 2000.

Although the 2000 law was an important step, it was ultimately ineffective. Protesters could stand inside the buffer zone, blocking health center entrances without violating the law. PPLM once again turned to Beacon Hill to advocate for a more effective law.

As a State Representative at the time, PPLM CEO Marty Walz was a lead sponsor of our current, successful buffer zone legislation. The fixed 35-foot zone law passed in 2007 thanks to broad support. Now, patients and staff access our health centers safely and easily, while protestors still have ample opportunity to exercise their free speech rights.

Over the last six months, we focused on supporting the Attorney General’s office in defending the law. With Planned Parenthood Federation of America, we filed a “friend of the court” brief outlining how the law has worked to protect public safety.

We also engaged the media to ensure the story of how important the buffer zone is to patients, staff, and public safety is fully represented in the public conversation. Diverse outlets including The New York Times, USA Today, ABC World News and NBC Nightly News have covered the case.

As the Supreme Court considers its ruling this spring, our top priority remains the same: keeping patients and staff safe.

For more information about the buffer zone law, please visit www.pplmvotes.org.
It's hard to believe I am approaching my one year anniversary with PPLM. Time flies when you’re protecting the buffer zone, getting to know supporters across the state, and putting together a strategic plan!

As I sat in the Supreme Court last month and listened to the oral argument in the buffer zone case, I was struck by how privileged I am to lead PPLM. Because, even when we’re facing big challenges, I have tremendous allies like you by my side. Some Supreme Court Justices may have trouble imagining what the 35-foot buffer zone looks like (a tape measure would have helped!), but you know what it means to our patients and staff. You know the buffer zone protects safe access to reproductive health care. And I know you’ll be there to help us, whatever we must do to protect that access in the future.

PPLM is reaching another big milestone this month, unveiling a new strategic plan to guide our health care, advocacy, and education work for the next three years. I look forward to sharing the details of our plan with you in the coming months. Your support has gotten us this far, and we’re depending on your continued partnership to advance our mission of protecting and promoting access to sexual and reproductive health care and the freedom for men and women to decide what health care they need and want. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Martha M. Walz

Gail Kaplan began volunteering with Planned Parenthood in Texas in 1973, soon after the landmark Roe v Wade decision. “I was around when abortion was illegal,” Gail says. “I will do everything in my power to make sure that doesn’t happen again. So volunteering came naturally.”

At PPLM, Gail has volunteered as a patient escort captain and on the Counseling and Referral hotline for more than ten years. As a volunteer escort, Gail has seen what a difference the buffer zone law has made. “Before, it was dangerous and scary for patients,” she says. “Now, it’s peaceful out there.” Along with her fellow volunteers, Gail is committed to continuing her work regardless of what the Supreme Court decides this spring.

Over her years of volunteering, Gail has seen Planned Parenthood services expand. She points to the growth of preventive care and health care for men as signs of progress. “When you walk in here, you are taken care of,” she says. “No one will judge you. With more services, more people have access to that kind of care.”
With your help, we’re working toward a healthy future for our state by strengthening our community presence in central Massachusetts. Our first health center opened in Worcester in 1982, and in 2010 we expanded access to family planning services with new health centers in Fitchburg, Marlborough, and Milford. Now, we are strengthening our community partnerships to increase access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health care.

This spring, with generous support from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the MetroWest Health Foundation, we will expand two of our successful education programs into the central Massachusetts region. We are currently recruiting for the Worcester chapter of our Get Real Teen Council peer leadership program. During the 2014-15 school year, students will receive extensive training and mentorship and will lead presentations for their schools and communities.

Expanding Options for Emergency Contraception

Nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended. That’s why Planned Parenthood launched the “EC4U” campaign this fall. “EC4U” or “Emergency Contraception For You” is aimed at educating Massachusetts women about all of their emergency contraception options.

The most commonly known form of emergency contraception is progestin pills, also known under brand name Plan B. Although Plan B was in the news last year when it became available over the counter without age restrictions, many women don’t know that the copper IUD is the most effective form of emergency contraception.

The EC4U campaign includes training for our health care providers, media outreach, and a social media education campaign. In addition, all seven PPLM locations across Massachusetts now carry the full range of EC options: copper IUD, progestin pills (Plan B One-Step and Next Choice), and pills containing ulipristal acetate (ella).

Through our online EC4U campaign, information about emergency contraception was viewed more than 40,000 times.
Planned Parenthood supporters gathered at local house parties this fall and winter to support our health care, education, and advocacy work. Events in Cambridge, Dover-Dedham-Westwood, Lincoln, and Newton raised more than $290,000.

Join us!

Support Planned Parenthood in your community by attending one of our upcoming events! For information about tickets or how to get involved with a future house party, email events@pplm.org.

March 20  Young Friends of PPLM “Big Bash!”
April 10  Winchester House Party
May 1    Lexington House Party
May 14   Boston House Party
May 21   Weston House Party
May 22   Andover House Party
May 29   Brookline-Chestnut Hill House Party
June 4   Worcester House Party

Other spring house parties (dates being confirmed): Concord-Carlisle, South Shore, Wayland, Wellesley


Images courtesy of Natasha Moustache Photography.