

# Coalition Building for Reproductive Justice: Hartford as a Site of Resistance against Crisis Pregnancy Centers

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*In the midst of contemporary struggles to fight back against challenges to abortion rights, other important areas of reproductive justice work can be elided. One such area concerns Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs), which are non-profit (often religious) organizations that offer services like parenting classes, religious counseling, and material goods for newborns (i.e. diapers or formula), but many CPCs also present themselves as if they are comprehensive reproductive health clinics that offer abortion services. In Hartford, the four of us have been part of a larger coalition working to curb deceptive advertising practices at CPCs, and this article outlines both why CPCs are a central reproductive justice issue and how we have addressed them in our community. We argue that tactical, flexible coalitions that prioritize lived experiences of community members are key for making rhetorical interventions that advance reproductive justice. Thus, we present multiple perspectives of reproductive health partnerships—community partner (Erica), faculty (Megan), and student (Eleanor and*

*Sam)—to analyze the role of public storytelling in coalitional activism focused on regulating crisis pregnancy centers.*

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On the evening of November 20th 2017, NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut (hereafter NARAL), a reproductive rights organization, led hundreds of activists, community organizations, elected officials, healthcare providers, college students, social workers, lawyers, researchers, and young people as they flooded Hartford, Connecticut's City Hall to testify on Hartford's Pregnancy Information, Disclosure, and Protection ordinance in front of the City Council. This moment and this piece of legislation was the result of a year's worth of policy work and in-the-trenches organizing around reproductive healthcare access in Hartford, led by NARAL's Community Organizer, Erica Crowley. This organizing began early in 2017 when a crisis pregnancy center, formerly known as St. Gerard's Center for Life, moved into the South Green section of Hartford and opened doors as "The Hartford Women's Center" in the same condo complex as and just twenty feet away from Hartford GYN Center, Connecticut's only independent abortion clinic. NARAL partnered with the National Institute for Reproductive Health<sup>1</sup> and the Hartford GYN Center to pass an ordinance regulating advertising practices by crisis pregnancy centers in the city of Hartford. Following Erica's leadership, Megan, Eleanor, and Sam were a part of that coalition built by NARAL in the fall of 2017, and the four of us have continued partnering on reproductive justice projects since that time. In this article, we present multiple perspectives of reproductive health partnerships—community partner (Erica), faculty (Megan), and student (Eleanor and Sam)—to analyze the role of public storytelling in coalitional activism focused on regulating crisis pregnancy centers. We argue that tactical, flexible coalitions that prioritize lived experiences of community members are key for making rhetorical interventions, including the public hearings and student research and writing projects that we discuss, that advance reproductive justice.

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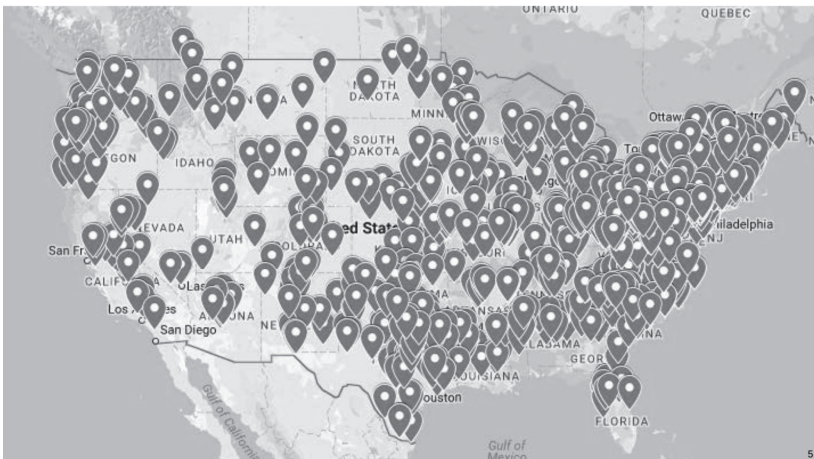
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1 A legal organization focused on reproductive rights legislation that drafted the city ordinance.

justice work can be elided. SisterSong’s definition of reproductive justice—“the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities”—requires that we protect the right to safe and legal abortion as well as consider broader issues in our activist and scholarly work (“Reproductive Justice”). Despite near constant attacks on abortion rights in states and cities around the country, Connecticut’s long-term status as a pro-choice state has uniquely positioned it to move forward on statewide and local proactive reproductive justice legislation, making our work there an ideal case study for this piece. For example, in 2019, Connecticut passed the strongest paid family medical leave act in the country and a \$15 minimum wage, and in 2017, Hartford was the second city to pass a crisis pregnancy center ordinance that survived the 2018 *NIFLA v. Becerra* decision (16-1140, Supreme Court).

NARAL, though primarily a reproductive rights organization, has been a key partner in research, public education and organizing, and coalition building around the regulation of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs).

## **THERE ARE ABOUT 2,500 ANTI-CHOICE CRISIS PREGNANCY CENTERS IN THE UNITED STATES**



*(“Crisis Pregnancy Centers: A Threat to Reproductive Freedom” 2018)*

CPCs are widespread (see above image) non-profit organizations, often religiously-affiliated, whose mission is to counsel people facing unplanned pregnancies away from choosing abortion. These organizations continue to be prevalent even as licensed family planning clinics close across the country due to increased abortion restrictions. CPCs are often located in low-income communities, communities of color, and medically underserved communities where many people do not have regular access to reproductive healthcare providers. While many CPCs offer services like parenting classes, religious counseling, and material goods for newborns (i.e. diapers or formula), CPCs also often present themselves as if they are comprehensive reproductive health clinics that offer abortion services.<sup>2</sup> For example, many CPCs purposefully use misleading advertisements, webpages, and signage to confuse people who are seeking medical services for their pregnancy, especially abortions—labeling themselves “Women’s Centers” rather than using their full legal name, such as St. Gerard’s Center for Life. Combining changed names with advertising phrases like “Thinking about abortion? Swing by our Center,” makes it easier for women to assume they are visiting a full reproductive health center, as opposed to a CPC. This becomes even more confusing when CPCs purposefully choose locations next door to or within the same plaza as clinics that offer abortion services. In Hartford, St. Gerard’s Center for Life re-labeled themselves the “Hartford Women’s Center” and opened a location directly across the sidewalk from Hartford GYN Center, the only independent abortion clinic in Connecticut. Through a combination of intentionally deceptive advertising, signage, and strategic locations, CPCs effectively target people who already face significant barriers to reproductive healthcare; thus, activists should ensure that they are aware of the ways CPCs can diminish people’s ability to make informed reproductive health decisions, both nationally and locally.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on CPCs and the tactics they use, please see NARAL Pro-Choice CT’s report: “Crisis Pregnancy Centers: A Threat to Reproductive Freedom.” 2018. *NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut Foundation*. <https://connecticut.prochoiceamericaaffiliates.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2018/03/2018-CPC-Report.pdf>.

To share our stories of reproductive justice coalitions aimed at regulating CPCs, we draw on and extend scholarship that discusses relationship building for community engagement. In Paula Mathieu's (2005) foundational work on tactical partnerships, she urges scholars toward "rhetorically responsive engagement that seeks timely partnerships, which acknowledge the ever-changing spatial terrain, temporal opportunities, and voices of individuals" (xiv). She argues that, as people seek to institutionalize their community engagement work and keep it on the schedule of the university, we are less able to partner reciprocally because the university inevitably becomes the controlling force determining the goals and parameters of the project. Mary P. Sheridan (2018) offers a "knotworking" approach to collaborative work that aligns well with Mathieu's argument. Knotworking refers to "braided activities when people collaborate on an issue or project, bringing together their own (often disparate) agendas, histories, tools, and goals, to form a stabilized-for-now group" (Sheridan 2018, 219). Sheridan is examining how faculty and graduate students come together on a shared project and weave in and out of multiple engagements together, but knotworking collaborations are also an important way to think about community collaborations, considering how partners can come together and apart through multiple projects over time. A key element of knotworking is "helping participants interrogate power, knowledge making, and relationship building within their collaborative partnerships" (Sheridan 2018, 214). These flexible approaches to partnerships make possible many of the best practices for partnering with community members being articulated by scholars today. Additionally, Steven Alvarez (2017) argues for *confianza*, a "reciprocal relationship in which individuals feel cared for," which involves "mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation" (4). Rachel Wendler Shah (2018) urges us to consider "the emotional dynamics of engagement for community members," not only for the sake of our students or staff at nonprofit organizations, but also to promote healthier direct partnerships with community members (90). And Andrea Riley Mukavetz (2014) details an approach to knowledge making that relies on "relationality" and "there-ness," which "address[es] how unseen labor is crucial to how projects are organized, sustained, and analyzed," letting us "make the unseen and difficult to articulate visible and intellectual" (122). Riley Mukavetz and other indigenous scholars (Angela Haas 2007; Malea Powell 2012; Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq 2019; Linda Tuhiwai Smith

2014; Kim TallBear 2014) have forwarded research methodologies that rely on speaking “with and alongside” our research participants (Riley Mukavetz 2014, 122). Each of these scholars articulate different elements of flexible and tactical relationship building and knowledge making practices that help us de-center the academy and prioritize community needs as residents articulate them, an approach that we forward here in our discussion of how we led (Erica) and participated in (Megan, Eleanor, Sam) coalition work for reproductive justice that centered the stories of those most affected by CPCs.

In this article, we focus on our partnerships with NARAL and offer multiple perspectives—community partner, faculty, and student—on coalition building and public storytelling for reproductive justice. After a brief synopsis of our projects together, we showcase three different perspectives on what we have done and learned together through tactical partnership building: (1) Erica’s organizing model for NARAL, focused on the work of building a flexible coalition for a public hearing, (2) Eleanor’s experience testifying as a student at both city and state hearings, and (3) Sam’s behind-the-scenes writing work building a research database for NARAL to continue their work to advance reproductive rights in Connecticut. Each of these sections examines how different knowledges, writing, and unseen labor go into multiple kinds of projects and partnerships that make up the work of reproductive justice. By layering our own narratives and telling multiple stories of our work together, we model the multivocal storytelling tactics focused on lived experiences used within the Hartford coalition to win reproductive justice gains in Connecticut. Centering storytelling in our collaborative work allows us not only to resist challenges to abortion rights, but also to imagine and enact reproductive justice for all.

## CREATING TACTICAL PARTNERSHIPS

*Megan*

In my three years as Director of Community Learning at Trinity, my goal was *always* to follow the lead of community leaders.<sup>3</sup> In Hartford, I never wanted Trinity to be leading conversations about

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3 As we finalize our revisions on this piece, Megan is transitioning from her role at Trinity to a new position as an Assistant Professor of English at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

where our city should be heading (largely because very few members of our faculty and staff are residents here and few students are from Hartford). Instead, I aimed to find the good work that others were already pursuing and determined how I could use institutional resources and a variety of rhetorical strategies to amplify and extend it. Because most of my work was based on curricular partnerships, connecting the university and community often looked like engaging multiple courses or programs in working with the same partner to extend our collaborations over time. Additionally, because my training is in writing studies, I often spent time helping faculty create community-engaged public writing projects that fulfilled course goals and provided their partners with communication materials across modes that met their rhetorical needs. Our long-term partnership with NARAL is one example of what community-engaged public writing projects can look like.

In Sheridan's (2018) discussion of knotworking collaborations, she speaks of the "braiding and re-braiding" of "deep-learning projects" for faculty and graduate students as they learn how to be feminist community-engaged scholars (230). Here, I want to think of knotworking collaborations as a model for moving in and out of community partnerships responsively, showing up to help without overburdening and being a part of multiple kinds of rhetorical interventions. As described above, our partnership began with showing up at the fall 2017 public hearing on crisis pregnancy centers both to speak and to participate in other tasks (e.g., handing out pamphlets, signing up others to speak, and saving seats) to ensure that the lived experiences of Hartford residents could be shared. Not long after, I approached Erica and her colleague Brenna in January about the possibility of a course project, for which Eleanor and Sam had advocated. In my "Building Knowledge for Social Change" course, students work in groups on a semester-long community partnership project that includes a research and writing component, and Eleanor and Sam identified NARAL as a potential partner early in November. Because we had attended the public hearing and had connections to other people at Trinity who had met and worked with Erica and Brenna, they were amenable to a project with us. However, they asked us to shift focus from sex education (Eleanor and Sam's original proposal) to work that was more of a priority for them—



further research on CPCs<sup>4</sup> and writing across genres to share that information broadly.

Following this successful semester-long project, we have continued to move in and out of work together, braiding and re-braiding our partnership. Sam and Eleanor have each served as interns at NARAL and have done individual research projects through the [Community Learning Research Fellows](#) program, advised indirectly and directly by Erica and Megan. Erica has joined Megan as a staff member at Trinity's Center for Hartford Engagement and Research but remains highly involved in reproductive justice work in the city, most notably as a member of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Hartford Women. And we have all continued to show up for protests, hearings, and meetings to advance NARAL's work in the city.

Knotworking collaborations also give us a frame to think about the broader reproductive justice work that we are doing with, but which is not always led by, NARAL. Erica, as a member of the Hartford Women's Commission, has spent most of 2019 and 2020 pushing for stronger sexual harassment guidelines for city employees and for justice in multiple cases where male police officers were harassing female colleagues. Megan has been a part of calling for investigation into racist policies and procedures by the police in a nearby suburb after an officer killed a Latino teenager during a traffic stop, and she and Erica led a spring 2020 student group in researching and writing a report analyzing how outside groups can intervene in police union contract processes. Sam has been a student leader of the Green Dot initiative to address sexual assault on campus. And Eleanor played a large role in student efforts to stop a thinly veiled white supremacist group from gaining official status as a "student group" on campus. In each of these efforts we find ourselves braiding in and out of our work with each other, NARAL, and other activists, combining rhetorical and in-person interventions to pursue safe and sustainable communities for all—a key element of reproductive justice.

Where we started though, was in Hartford City Hall, coming together under the guidance of Erica and her colleagues at NARAL

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<sup>4</sup> Sam and Eleanor's group made multiple infographics to share information about CPCs with audiences across Hartford. These infographics are featured in the toolkit at the end of this issue.



to publicly advocate—primarily through sharing stories of people’s lived experiences—to regulate the malicious rhetorical practices CPCs use to deceive people in need of reproductive health services. Through that foundational moment, we were able to build out our long-term partnership where we have braided in and out of projects together over the last three years. Each different element of our work has shaped our thinking about coalitional partnerships that use writing to enact social change—whether that’s seeing how storytelling is key for changemaking (discussed by Erica and Eleanor below), how organizational writing projects can be just as impactful as public storytelling (the focus of Sam’s section), or what it means to work collaboratively to enact reproductive justice in our city. Below, Erica, Eleanor, and Sam tell stories of coalition building, writing, and reproductive justice, discussing how partnerships are formed and how centering lived experiences through narratives is key to enacting social change for reproductive justice.

## **ORGANIZING STRATEGY AND BUILDING A HARTFORD COALITION**

*Erica*

While I was completing my Master’s in Social Work with a focus in Community Organizing, my classmates and I spoke often about the importance of building coalitions, or flexible partnerships, and the importance of storytelling to create social change. Some of the first lessons I learned in the classroom were on macro social work theories like networked and nested systems theories (Neal and Neal 2013); mid-range theories of community organizing; and the ways that race, ethnicity, social class, and gender impact organizing efforts (Gutiérrez and Lewis 2012). As I put these theories into practice in 2017 as an Organizer at NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut, I framed my efforts around how a woman living in Hartford experiences targeting by a national anti-choice movement. I was asking myself, “Where does she live and what’s the history in that community? Where does she go to the doctor, if at all? Where is her church? What does her family and support system look like?” As I learned about the answers to these questions, these women’s experiences guided my partnership building and storytelling.

As I began gathering a coalition of people to address CPCs in Hartford, I would describe the issue, and the most common response

I received was, “Seriously? In Connecticut? I can’t believe this is happening here.” And this makes sense—Connecticut has long been considered a pro-choice state and codified the right to abortion in state law in 1990 through the Freedom of Choice Act. However, these legal protections on the right to choose did not exempt Connecticut from the influence of a national anti-choice movement. Organized conservative religious groups were funneling funds and time into setting up an increasing number of CPCs across the state, and just steps from our office and the Hartford GYN Center, the “Hartford Women’s Center” was employing every deception and delay tactic in the book to target Hartford residents seeking abortion and emergency contraception. At this particular moment, there was an opportunity to protect Hartford residents from real harm and also to set up Hartford as a successful example and case study for other places in the country looking to regulate CPCs, particularly at a time when the rights to abortion and other reproductive healthcare services are under political attack. As we said previously, Hartford was the second city to pass a proactive ordinance of this kind that survived the 2018 *NIFLA v. Becerra* decision (16-1140, Supreme Court). Since its passage, Connecticut has been positioned to pursue similar proactive statewide legislation and raise CPCs as a real political issue in a pro-choice state.

The crux of this campaign’s success was a strong and flexible Hartford coalition. Our members were dedicated to understanding and lifting up the stories of women that had been negatively impacted by “The Hartford Women’s Center.” While NARAL is a reproductive rights political organization that advocates on a variety of issues, addressing CPCs and moving into reproductive justice work was something we could only do as part of a Hartford coalition. CPCs disproportionately target poor women, women of color, medically underserved communities (like Hartford), people without health insurance, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, young people, college students, and other marginalized populations and experiences addressed in the reproductive justice framework. Drawing on Rinku Sen’s best-practices for coalition building (2003, 135-137) my goals in building this coalition were: (1) to have a coalition familiar with and able to present both key messages and the stories of people who were impacted by a Hartford CPC first hand; (2) to include individuals and organizations representative of the broader Hartford community;

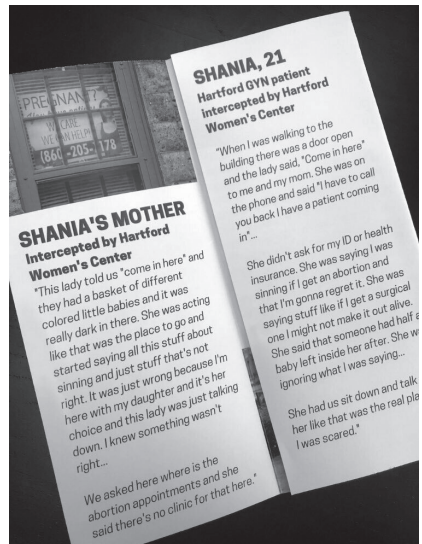
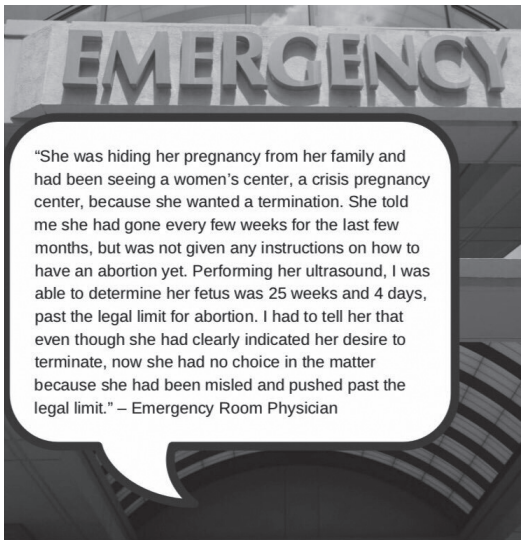
and (3) to have a flexible group of people and organizations I could call on as “rapid responders” while heading into this highly contentious local issue campaign with heavy opposition from various anti-abortion groups across the state and the country.

Some of our primary organizing goals were centered around storytelling. My short list of goals included: gathering personal stories from Hartford residents impacted by the CPC; using those stories to educate community residents and groups about the issue; and turning out those stories, people, and groups to Hartford City Hall for a public hearing on the proposed ordinance. To collect stories from Hartford GYN Center patients who had been intercepted or otherwise deceived by the neighboring CPC “Hartford Women’s Center,” I worked with a number of college students and clinic escort volunteers to train them as bilingual story collectors in the clinic, and, for over four months, we spent every Saturday from 7:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. in and outside the clinic.



The stories we collected came mostly from young Black women who were targeted and tricked into entering the CPC on their way to their scheduled abortion appointment at the Hartford GYN Center. To maintain anonymity of storytellers, the volunteers who collected stories in the clinic asked the women if they could write down their stories and read them under a pseudonym at public hearing, to which most agreed. Because of the stigma around abortion, particularly in Black communities in Hartford, none of the women felt comfortable

publicly testifying. When discussing this reluctance to testify with one of our coalition members, who is a longtime Black Hartford activist, she said, “that doesn’t surprise me. It took me a lifetime to be able to talk about my body. For Black girls, we don’t get to be proud of our p\*\*\*y like white girls, because when we are, bad things happen to us. We’re called ‘fast’ and people hurt us. History shows us that.” To protect the identity of the storytellers, I worked with college interns to create a print brochure with excerpts from each of the stories. While these stories existed in the experiences of what happened to these women, it was not until we put them in print and digital form that they existed for other people, including our political leaders. This brochure was a critical piece of writing which I used as an organizing tool when bringing others into the coalition.



*Excerpts from patients, providers, and others impacted by the CPC.*

After collecting a number of first-hand stories and capturing photos of the courtyard shared between Hartford GYN Center and the CPC to illustrate the issue, I knew I had enough material to move into building a coalition representative of the populations most likely to be impacted by CPCs in Hartford. I connected with reproductive rights organizations and health providers like Planned Parenthood of Southern New England; Hartford GYN Center; UCONN Medical

School, Hartford Hospital; Hartford-based nurse midwives, doulas, and clinic escorts; and the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. It was also important for us to work with a broader local coalition, including but not limited to: racial justice groups like Moral Monday CT; LGBTQ+ advocates like True Colors CT; Hartford-based social workers; Hartford area clergy members, including those from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; as well as long-time and well-respected Hartford community leaders. In turn, my agenda for all of my one-on-one organizing meetings was to help individuals and organizations recognize their stake in the issue, identify people already on board with whom they have relationships, and ultimately help them see how their work connects to a broader understanding of reproductive justice and a commitment to Hartford. As Lorraine Gutiérrez and Edith A. Lewis (2012) explain, uni-directional outreach approaches are particularly problematic when organizing with women of color, and they instead emphasize integrating personal and political issues through dialogue (217). One of the ways I was able to do this was by sparking an emotional reaction when sharing the stories of young women who had been unknowingly intercepted by the “Hartford Women’s Center” and by leaving written versions of those stories with coalition members.

As the central organizer on this issue, the stories I collected and shared allowed me to build trust with these well-known Hartford community members and organizations, which was critical in establishing a “stable-for-now” and politically powerful coalition. We built up a group of people who would drop everything and show up for us at the last minute or late into the evening if we needed it because they trusted us, and they cared about Hartford. They knew I had been on the ground working with patients at the local clinic as well as training clinic escorts to deal with an increasingly aggressive presence of anti-choice sidewalk protesters. Additionally, I had been building relationships with Hartford activists in the movements for Black Lives and LGBTQ+ rights for the past two years while enrolled in graduate school in the City. This level of personal trust among a diverse coalition of individuals and organizations lent NARAL credibility in the community and with City Council, which was especially important for a historically white organization doing work in a community of color. Thus, the coalition was able to remain



flexible enough to respond to organized, loud, and unpredictable opposition groups. Each coalition member was asked to provide written and/or spoken public testimony at the November 2017 public hearing on the proposed ordinance. Beyond that, I also asked everyone to be ready to counter ways the opposition would try to destabilize votes after the hearing, like when they showed up to other Council meetings unexpectedly or flooded the Council members with thousands of emails and phone calls. Because we asked the coalition to be ready for this, we were all able to act quickly to reassure City officials of the priorities of Hartford residents.



*City Hall Function Room for public hearing*

At the very crowded public hearing, Hartford City Hall was packed, largely with people from out of town. The majority of people opposed to the CPC ordinance were white non-residents who traveled in large numbers from across the state to stand against Hartford-specific legislation. The opposition's strongest asset was their size in numbers, whereas our coalition was tight-knit, well-prepared, and flexible. That evening, there were well over 300 people opposed, which caused the Council to stray from their regular process for public hearing and our coalition had to make some key in-the-moment decisions to ensure a win. As organizing expert Eric Mann (2011) reminds us, "tactically agile organizers" must learn to master quick-thinking, in the moment decisions "because things rarely go according to plan"

(137). Because of the strong degree of trust and the different roles of our coalition members, we were able to be flexible and immediately respond to a few unexpected changes. For example, twenty minutes before the start of the hearing, the chair informed the crowd that Hartford residents would be allowed to testify before non-residents, which completely changed our intended order of testifiers to frame the Hartford story. In that moment, I decided to call over clinic escorts, Trinity College students (including Sam and Eleanor), some of our medical providers and social workers, and other Hartford residents to sign themselves and other coalition members

up to testify. Additionally, I asked other coalition members to begin passing out our printed patient story brochures in the crowd and to city council aides, as we needed to ensure they could see the first-hand stories early on in what would be a seven hour public hearing.



*Hartford Councilman John Gale addresses the crowd before they are allowed to enter the hearing room.*

Throughout the public hearing, the members of our coalition testified and hit on key points relevant to the proposed policy, and the depth and diversity of supporters in the room was felt. This multivocal approach was intentional to ensure the arc of testimony was rooted in the opening statements of our on-the-ground organizers and volunteers who collected stories from impacted patients. We then had lawyers discuss the reasoning and constitutionality of the language, doctors who shared stories of their own patients, and pro-choice faith leaders, racial justice organizers, and LGBTQ+ advocates who voiced their support. Our testimony and media strategy focused on specific stories as well as statements like, “No matter what your personal





*Trinity students participate in the Nov. 2017 public hearing for the CPC ordinance*

feelings are on abortion, I think we can all agree that no one should be allowed to lie to women in Hartford.”

One of the threads throughout public testimony that was picked up by the media was the clear divide between Hartford residents who felt protective of their city and the non-residents from all over Connecticut who felt they could come into the City and tell people what to do with their bodies, their lives, and their City—an all too familiar process in Hartford and nationwide, especially when it comes to reproductive justice issues (Ross 2017; Ross 2016). The messages from the testimonies went far beyond the right to choose and moved seamlessly into a narrative about the dignity and safeguarding of Hartford residents from outside forces.

For example, Hartford nurse midwife Polly Moran testified:

“Too often, communities of color and higher poverty concentrated areas have been the target of misrepresentation, outright lies, and human rights abuses by organizations and authorities who operate under the guise of helping them. I strongly support the City’s efforts to safeguard women in our community from entities such as these crisis pregnancy centers.”

Hartford activist Bulaong Ramiz-Hall testified:

“It’s important that we listen to stories of women, that we hear their voices, that we hear their truths... and to make sure that women in our community, especially low-income Black and Brown women who this primarily impacts, and residents of Hartford who this primarily impacts, are at the center of this conversation.”

And Hartford activist Kamora Herrington explained:

“I just want to say I am astonished by how many non-residents are here tonight... To listen to you come into my city, and say you people are too ignorant to make your own decisions? It’s offensive. Council—Thank you. We voted for you to represent us, not to represent East Granby.”

By the time the ordinance passed in December of that year, we had done enough debriefing and processing of the campaign to understand that it was a combination of years-long planning and relationship building combined with a whirlwind, flexible, “doing-this-by-the-seat-of-our-pants” style organizing that was the reason for success. By centering the first-hand stories of impacted Hartford residents and using storytelling as an organizing and public testimony tool, we were able to build deep, trusting relationships with a diverse coalition. Combining the personal and political through public dialogue and storytelling (Gutiérrez and Lewis 2012) allowed our coalition to raise CPCs as a real political issue and public health concern in Hartford, which had not been done before.

## **STORYTELLING AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR ACCESS AND JUSTICE**

*Eleanor*

My work as an undergraduate student with a coalition that was tactical and flexible in nature and that prioritized storytelling as a means of providing access to historically disenfranchised communities was not only successful at a local level (and will hopefully be replicated soon at the state level), but also personally meaningful as I have continued learning about the work of reproductive justice. In my work with

NARAL, I have seen firsthand that coalitions and alliances that center multivocal storytelling and rhetorical interventions in their campaigns can yield successful results and are thus fundamental to the reproductive justice movement as a whole. I specifically worked with NARAL in the fall of 2017 to pass a local ordinance to limit and regulate the misinformation disseminated by CPCs in Hartford, and then in the spring of 2018, we took the same issue to the state legislature. In both instances, public storytelling was central to the campaign and allowed me to engage in this tactical partnership in meaningful ways. At the Hartford City Hall meeting, Erica encouraged the group we had gathered from Trinity College to provide testimony at the hearing. Our influence was multifaceted: we were college students and therefore represented a population targeted by CPCs, and we were Hartford residents who could speak about how this issue has impacted the community we all live in. A number of us signed up to speak and anxiously waited as we heard speaker after speaker until it was our turn. My testimony was clear and brief, though my voice wavered slightly as I felt all eyes upon me. I spoke of how CPCs pose a threat to choice and access for many populations, and as a person who could potentially be in need of reproductive services and as a Hartford resident living less than two miles away from a CPC, I could provide a perspective on who this issue actually impacts. After I talked, I listened to other people discuss their own experiences and fears about CPCs and their manipulative practices. The public hearing as a whole brought this issue into a frightening perspective for me, as this was the first time I had heard in depth about the practices of CPCs, even though I had engaged with the issue of reproductive justice before and considered myself informed about the topic. I recognize now, as I did in that moment, the power of telling these stories, which were ultimately responsible for the coalition's victory at City Hall.

In the next braided layer of my working relationship with NARAL, Sam, Megan, and I returned in the spring of 2018 to support NARAL by providing our time, energy, and resources to their statewide campaign against CPCs. This time, part of that support came in the form of sitting through hours of testimony in the Legislative Office Building, as I waited to read public testimony on behalf of women not present in front of the Committee on Public Health to support the proposed bill. There were a number of reasons why some women

could not present their stories at the public hearing. Firstly, the nature of these accounts is highly personal and sensitive, and not all women are comfortable sharing their stories in such a public manner. It takes incredible strength to share these stories on an individual level, let alone stand in front of a group of strangers and divulge private medical information and personal accounts of manipulation. Secondly, other barriers to participation exist that hinder access to the legislative process for specific groups of people. Certain populations targeted by the CPCs, such as working-class communities, are also systematically disenfranchised in legislative proceedings because of the time, access, and privilege needed to navigate this system. Here my positionality and privilege as a white person and a college student provided me access to a process that other people are denied. I stayed in the building for extended hours and testified without great risk to myself, but that is not the case for many others, which is an essential shortcoming of this system of justice.

Working with NARAL during my first year of college made an enduring impact on not only my career aspirations but also on my fundamental understanding of a safe and sustainable reproductive justice campaign. Through the semester, I tangibly experienced the importance of including a diversity of voices and lived experiences within a coalition, especially ones that concern intersectional issues such as reproductive justice. While I was a part of the coalition because, as a college student, I'm a potential target of CPCs, I saw firsthand how this issue becomes inherently more oppressive to those with multiple marginalized identities, including race, disability, and socioeconomic status. These movements need expansive perspectives in order to convince legislators that these issues are pervasive and to explain how they impact many different communities, but the current system of legislation does not always support this diversity and can prioritize the voices of some over those of others. Because of the logistical privilege of my flexible schedule as a college student and my white skin privilege, I was able to challenge this inequity by using my time to give voice to concerns of those excluded from the process so that injustice rooted within the system would not be forgotten. Organizations must not forget their positionality; communities that organize, advocate, and testify must always include people most directly impacted by the issue because those closest to the issue are also closest to the solution. It takes access and institutional privilege

to know when your rights are being violated and to fight to right this wrong. Therefore, we must work to create advocacy models that bring together a multitude of voices, particularly those who are directly affected and often left out of advocacy, to brainstorm solutions. Working with NARAL enabled me to experience an inclusive campaign that recognized the positionality of its organizers and, because of this, was able to navigate an unjust system to forward reproductive justice work within affected communities.

I also remember experiencing validation and elation in this process which allowed me to feel as though I made a tangible contribution to a larger movement that I cared deeply about. This project not only reaffirmed my desire to pursue work surrounding reproductive justice but also allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of myself. I walked away from my first year of college having a direction and a priority about the kind of work that I wanted to engage in for the next three years at this institution. I was hooked, and there was no going back. I came away from this experience understanding that I can make an impact, not only in the future, but especially now, as a college student. It provided me with achievable goals for outcomes of community engagement and, most importantly, with a sense of belief in myself that has enabled me to continue furthering reproductive justice in my communities. It was important to celebrate the wins and see the results of our contribution, but it was also important for me to understand the extremely high expectations this project set for my future partnerships. Those expectations compel me to continue to fight to make every organizing experience as successful as my projects with NARAL and to one day strengthen reproductive justice to an extent where organizations like NARAL are not needed. Before that can happen, coalitions and alliances must continue to create tactical and flexible partnerships and to incorporate multivocal rhetorical interventions and public storytelling in their fight for reproductive justice.

## **CONTINUING PARTNERSHIPS AND ADAPTING TO ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS**

*Sam*

Through my work with NARAL as part of the Community Action Gateway at Trinity College and the continued work with them that

followed, I have seen both the excitement that comes from a “big win” and the foundational work that comes before direct change. This section will discuss the types of work that I have done with NARAL, how that work was in direct response to their organizational needs at the time, and the different but equally important outcomes of both projects. The ultimate goal throughout our collaborations was to maintain a lasting and flexible partnership with NARAL that helped advance their mission while making sure each writing project was conducive to the circumstances and endeavors of the organization at the time.

As Eleanor, I, and other students were planning to propose a project with NARAL for Megan’s Spring 2018 class, we heard about crisis pregnancy centers and the city ordinance NARAL was pushing in Hartford. My project group and several other students in our “Envisioning Social Change” class attended the hearings, and many of us testified in favor of the ordinance. Not only were we passionate about testifying because of our impending partnership, but we had learned that CPCs often situate themselves near colleges and universities to actively target college-aged women. The city council ultimately voted in favor of the ordinance, and the beginning of our work with NARAL could not have felt more exciting and important. Following the ordinance passing, we began our spring class project. While Eleanor focused on part of the project that involved her publicly testifying at a state hearing, I am focusing on some of our research and writing work that focused on regulating crisis pregnancy centers and creating buffer zones around licensed clinics to protect patients. Our research was guided by both Megan and by NARAL through regular meetings and check-ins. We came to the consensus of creating a presentation on buffer zones for NARAL to view and use in the future as well as creating multiple infographics about CPCs for a variety of audiences. The infographics were to be used to educate various groups in the community on the goals and effects of these centers and were written in different formats and tones to do so most effectively. Our work on these writing projects is another form of storytelling: the presentation provides NARAL and their partners with information on a tactic aimed at protecting the broader landscape of reproductive justice while the infographics help NARAL to tell the truth about CPCs to the greater Hartford community. Both writing projects help to build a foundation from

which NARAL can develop their public storytelling advocacy that centers the experiences of Connecticut women, as described above by Erica and Eleanor.

Leading into my sophomore year, I applied for another program at Trinity College called the Community Learning Research Fellows with plans to partner with NARAL once again. This program combines community-based work in the form of an internship or thesis project with a course focusing on community partnerships. I reached out to NARAL with the hope of continuing my work with them in whatever way they needed, and they took me on as an intern. Experiencing a win early in our experience with community-based research is perhaps one of the reasons that both Eleanor and I felt the desire to further our partnership with NARAL after our first year as undergraduates. My new project was intended to focus on sex education in Connecticut schools. However, due to the organization's needs at the time, the project's focus later shifted to research on factors that impact abortion access in the United States. While it can be somewhat disappointing to change the entire focus of a project, the sex education work I hoped to do was not conducive to the goals that NARAL had at the time. Remaining flexible within community partnerships can be a challenge, but prioritizing the goals of the organization ensures that the partnership is useful for both parties. The work that we were doing the previous spring semester helped create obvious, concrete changes in the community, but as I learned through my internship, the outcomes of these collaborations can vary in scale and visibility.

When I met with NARAL at the start of my internship, we discussed what would be most valuable to them, and we arrived at the idea of a research database compiling information on five significant barriers to abortion access in the United States including: parental notification/consent laws, physicians only laws, mandatory waiting periods, cost/insurance barriers, and targeted regulation of abortion provider (TRAP) laws. The goal of the research was to help situate Connecticut nationally in terms of reproductive healthcare access. When our tactical partnership reformed that fall, NARAL had recently experienced significant staff turnover, and they simply did not have the time or resources to work as closely with my research



project as they did the semester before. Rather than taking the time to meet weekly or biweekly about my progress, I often updated the NARAL staff through email, and we made adjustments to my tasks that way. With only a few in-person meetings, this collaboration differed immensely from the initial group project we did as first-year students. The flexible nature of the partnership allows for drastically different types of collaborations that still ultimately yield useful products and successful outcomes that advance reproductive justice.

The database that resulted from my research internship is not only a writing project itself; it provides the data and information that foregrounds many of the stories that NARAL tells. Throughout the semester of compiling sources, many of the technology specialists at Trinity College and the Community Learning Research Fellows team suggested that I use a variety of software systems to compile my research into a database. While these systems make sense to many of us immersed in academia with institutional subscriptions, NARAL does not pay for these systems, and they can be unnecessarily complicated. Utilizing a system they have access to and are familiar with, I created the database through Google Sheets with separate folders for each topic, hyperlinks to accessible PDFs, and short summaries of each source to easily guide NARAL to the source most

My Drive > Research Fellows Deliverable > TRAP Laws Research

Name	Owner	Last modified
TRAP Laws Source Links	me	Nov 28, 2018 me
TRAP Laws Research Sheet	me	Dec 1, 2018 me

Organized into separate folders for each topic

Summaries provide enough information for NARAL to decide if the source is relevant to their current work

Google Drive ensures easy access and allows for future additions

Hyperlinked titles take you to PDFs stored in "Source Links" folders

	A	B	C	D
	Title	Date	Type	Summary
1	Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers	2016	Online Article	This article provides a table compilation broken down by state and which TRAP laws they have. It also provides some background information on what these laws consist of and highlights how many states have what types of restrictions.
2	14 States Have Passed Laws Making It Harder to Get an Abortion Already This Year	2016	Online News Article	This news article was published in June of 2016 and it discusses a variety of different laws that had recently been passed to limit abortion access. In terms of TRAP laws, they provide a graphic that demonstrates which states have laws about ambulatory surgical center standards and admitted privileges. They provide a general idea of where the entire country is with access.
4	Impact of Clinic Closures on Women Obtaining Abortion Services After Implementation of a Restrictive Law in Texas	2016	Study in a Scholarly Journal	This study examines the negative impacts on women that exist as a result of a TRAP law that was recently passed in Texas and resulted in multiple clinic closures. Using residents of Texas who are seeking abortion care at 10 different clinics in Texas, the survey administered reveals multiple burdens that women faced as a result of the closures. These include travel, cost, appointment delays and more. The study ultimately finds that TRAP laws and the closures that occurred as a result have significant negative effects on women in Texas.
5	State Abortion Policies, Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider Laws, and Abortion Demand	2010	Study in a Scholarly Journal	A study that is meant to determine whether TRAP laws have an impact on demand for abortion. Only looking at licensing fees and plan/personnel laws, the study uses information from various different sources that track abortion data as well as socioeconomic data. They found that there is no independent effect of on demand when looking at these laws.

*A portion of my research poster “Effectively Communicating Research on Factors that Impact Abortion Access” presented on December 10th, 2018 (McCarthy 2018).*

pertinent to their present focus. Providing NARAL with a deliverable that was usable and relevant to their needs while being cognizant of their time throughout the semester was the main priority for this project.

A project like this one does not necessarily yield change as tangible as the ordinance passing, but after working on multiple projects with NARAL, I have come to understand that a win like that only occurs after copious amounts of preparation. The tool I created for NARAL is one that can help them establish the groundwork for future advocacy endeavors again and again, providing the foundational research needed to ensure reproductive justice across our state. I have seen firsthand multiple levels of reproductive justice work, from foundational organizing to monumental wins, and through that time, I have developed a strong understanding of why it matters to follow the lead of organizers who are listening to those most affected by reproductive justice issues. Creating flexible, tactical partnerships that prioritize the organization and, ultimately, Hartford residents is what has created the lasting nature of our collaborations with NARAL. During our time together, I have seen that, regardless of the type of project, when it occurs, and how often it changes, NARAL's needs and goals have to remain the priority of the partnership, as NARAL has the insight and on-the-ground knowledge to know what steps need to be taken to enhance reproductive justice for all.

## CONCLUSION

*Megan*

Through each of these stories/sections, we share how writing and storytelling enable activists to center the lived experiences of people who have been affected by CPCs in their changemaking work, even when these people may not feel comfortable sharing their own stories publicly. Erica and Eleanor share how gathering and sharing stories is key for public advocacy that can lead to political wins and safer communities—including the many factors indicating why Erica's slow, methodical approach to ethically collecting and sharing stories was necessary—and Sam shows the kinds of research writing and data organization needed to provide a foundation and frame for that storytelling. Rooting reproductive justice coalitions in the stories of people's lived experiences involves thoughtful, long-term work that

can be done collaboratively, but it must be led by those closest to the issue, which means that higher education partners are likely to be members, but rarely leaders of the coalition.

Higher education's community engagement efforts do not work when people enter community space assuming they know what is best and try to take the lead in addressing local issues. What we have seen again and again is that the best way forward is to work in coalition with those who deeply understand community issues: organizations and groups of residents who are in touch with people about what they need, know what has already been tried, and understand the best approaches for working with community members. The partnerships between NARAL and Trinity we describe above work *because* the three of us at Trinity always foregrounded the needs of NARAL over our own interests, and NARAL was in turn foregrounding the needs of women in Hartford. Had Eleanor, Sam, and I tried to move forward with Eleanor and Sam's specific interests in sex education, assuming we knew what was most needed for reproductive justice, we might have completed a one semester project on the topic, but we likely would not have formed the long-term partnership that has enabled us to continue this work over time. By trusting that NARAL knew best what was needed, we were able to form knotworking collaborations, moving in and out of reproductive justice work together. Through working with this coalition for reproductive justice, led by NARAL, we were able to gain more breadth and depth in our understanding of these issues while doing research and storytelling work that expanded reproductive justice across the city.

We end by urging our readers to consider a few questions on *how* to take action: What are the reproductive justice issues beyond abortion rights that need your attention in your community right now? How and where can you keep learning about these broader issues? Who is already working on this, and how can you join their coalitions? Whose stories are others telling about reproductive justice, and who might be left out? How can you advocate for and share diverse stories about reproductive justice within your own community and more expansive networks? Consider that your path forward might be foundational, organizational work like Sam's research and database building. It could be sharing your own story or stepping up to read other's words

like Eleanor did. Or it could be finding folks like Erica who are on the ground gathering stories and building coalitions to take political action. Telling stories that can foster change in our communities is a long process that involves many people and actions, and writing is woven in and throughout the work. To enact reproductive justice, we must be willing to braid and unbraid within flexible coalitions that center the lived experiences of community members who deal with these issues every day, using multiple modes of organizing, writing, and public storytelling to create change in our communities.

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**Erica Crowley** is Director of Community Learning at the Center for Hartford Engagement and Research at Trinity College and former Organizer at NARAL Pro-Choice Connecticut. She has spent the past five years working in higher education and non-profit organizations in the Hartford area. She holds a Master's in Social Work with a concentration in Community Organizing from the University of Connecticut and continues to organize in Hartford today as a member of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Hartford Women.

**Eleanor Faraguna** is a senior Educational Studies and Psychology major with a Community Action minor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. They grew up in Houston, Texas where their interest in reproductive justice began and has expanded throughout college. This is Eleanor's third collaboration with NARAL Pro-Choice CT, beginning as an intern in the Community Action Gateway in 2018 and continuing the partnership in 2019 as a Community Learning Research Fellow. As a Research Fellow, Eleanor created an organizing strategies report for more comprehensive sexual health education in Connecticut, a tool for the Healthy Youth Coalition, which NARAL is a member. Eleanor will graduate in May 2021 and plans to continue fighting for reproductive justice in Hartford through graduate education and beyond.



**Sam McCarthy** is a senior Sociology major and Community Action minor at Trinity College who grew up in Vancouver, WA. She began working with NARAL as part of the Community Action Gateway in 2018 and continued that work through an internship as part Community Learning Research Fellows. She researched and compiled a database for NARAL on factors that impact abortion access while in her position as a Research Fellow. She has continued to be involved with NARAL and other community action and reproductive justice projects in Hartford. Sam is planning to attend graduate school after finishing at Trinity and hopes to then pursue a career with a reproductive justice focus.

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