

# Feminist Group Hosts Day of Action

By **MAYA LONDON-SOUTHERN**

A group of students and faculty met in Hillcrest for an Planned Parenthood Action Forum, hosted by Feminist Action at Middlebury (FAM) on March 8. The forum was led by Paige Feeser, who serves as the Vermont Public Affairs Organizer for Planned Parenthood of Northern New England and representative organizer for Planned Parenthood Vermont Action Fund.

Feeser began her talk with an overview of Planned Parenthood's story, specifically discussing the organization in the aftermath 2016 election. She said that Republican congressional leaders moved to strip Planned Parenthood of all federal funding in Jan. 2017 in an attempt to fulfill their long time goal of eliminating abortion services. With then-president-elect about to take office, Republicans had taken quick actions to try to move their plan forward.

Federal defunding of Planned Parenthood would inhibit the two-and-a-half million patients who rely on the organization from accessing their healthcare services. Feeser said they were also working to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and block Planned Parenthood from accepting Medicaid reimbursements.

"So basically if a patient comes to us wanting to use Medicaid to pay for their services, we would no longer be able to accept that form of payment."

Such an action would have had disastrous consequences in a state like Vermont where, according to Feeser, 47 percent of the Planned Parenthood patient base access services using Medicaid funding. "So we knew we were up for the fight of our lives," she said.

To prevent this, Planned Parenthood worked to identify senators following the inauguration whom they could persuade to take action, among these were Republican senators, Lisa Murkowski, the Alaska senator and Susan Collins, the Maine senator. Volunteers wrote, called, and sought both out in public.

A total of 200,000 volunteers across the country assisted and organized Planned Parenthood events fighting to prevent Medicaid defunding and ACA repeal. Volunteers organized half of the 2400 events, made 250,000 phone calls, and signed 2.5 million petitions.

Collins's and Murkowski's votes against Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's July 2017 proposal to partially repeal the ACA, as well as Senator John McCain's dissenting vote, helped bring down the amendment.

"What an epic, epic time, but we won! We won! We won our first major battle," Feeser said. "And one of the major things to really emphasize here, is that we can think of the brand, but most importantly what made this most successful was our people."

With a slide titled "The Urgency of Now," Feeser moved on to talk about Planned Parenthood in 2018. She explained that because of the special elections that take place in states like Virginia and Alabama, more senators support Planned Parenthood now than in Jan. 2017.

"This helps us potentially avoid another vote against the Affordable Care Act and also entitlement reform," she said.

At the beginning of 2018, Paul Ryan vocalized plans to implement entitlement program reforms, which would mean deep cuts to Medicaid, Social Security and the ACA. Planned Parenthood has been preparing for attacks on these programs.

When Feeser asked who in the group knew what Title X entailed, only a few people raised their hands.

"This is what they want to have happen," she said. "They want people to not be educated about how access to birth control and reproductive health is funded."

Title X is the federal family planning program that provides funding to Planned Parenthood, allowing the organization to provide services to its patients on a sliding pay scale. It includes access to birth control, STI/STD testing and treatment and pregnancy testing. It does not include abortion services.

In February, the Trump administration said it would create new standards on how it would generate money for people who apply for Title X funding. The administration is aiming to provide preferential treatment to providers that promote abstinence-only, natural rhythm method, homeopathic birth control and other related services. This move would potentially exclude providers of more specialized birth control methods like the IUD and Nexplanon, which are 99 percent effective.

“This is the fight that we’ll most likely be fighting this summer,” Feeser said.

Feeser began the forum on a local level, asking the group one thing they would like to change on campus. At the end of the forum, Feeser addressed the group directly and called for a plan of action on a campus level.

“It was really meaningful to hear all the great ideas everyone had,” FAM co-president Cara Eisenstein ’18 said. “We are writing an Op-ed to the Campus about the #Fight4BirthControl campaign we will soon be launching on campus, where our long term goal is to have Middlebury’s administration make a public statement affirming their continued support for including no-cost contraceptives as part of the health insurance plan.”

FAM will petition for this campaign in the library the week after spring break. The club will create a go/link at its meeting on Tuesday from 8-9 p.m. in the Chellis House that will be a resource for information on the sexual and reproductive health services available through the college and in town.

This forum was another installment in the Generation Action initiative, which FAM reestablished this fall with a forum led by Feeser.