

Access To Reproductive Healthcare On Shaky Ground

By: Rachel Swansburg

AMHERST—

When it comes to access to quality reproductive healthcare on campus, UMass Amherst students and staff agree that the university does a decent job of providing it. However, many are unsure of what the future holds in terms of keeping that standard of care on a national level.

In November, Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker signed a [law](#) that requires state insurers to cover birth control without a copay. This means that Massachusetts women will have continued access to free birth control even if the Affordable Care Act – which Republicans have repeatedly campaigned on [dismantling](#) – is repealed. As it stands currently, the Affordable Care Act requires insurers to cover contraceptives.

The statewide move also goes against President Trump's [policy](#) that employers who have religious or moral objections to contraceptives do not have to cover them in their employee insurance packages.

Jillian Thomas, a sophomore art major, says this move could very well be an isolated event, and that other states are not likely to follow suit.

“It’s definitely encouraging, and I’m glad to hear it, but I’m relatively unsurprised, because this is the kind of stuff that Massachusetts does well. It is encouraging that some states are fighting back at that level and setting in stone how important women’s healthcare is, but there are a lot of states that might just push back more,” she said.

Others take a different view, saying that the law could be the first step towards a national movement. Hannah Saleeba, a sophomore art history and painting double major, says that this law reminds her of Massachusetts’ move to [legalize gay marriage](#) in 2004. “We were the first state to do that, and now it’s legal in all 50 states. I think there’s definitely going to be pressure on other states to take action like we have,” she said.

On a local level, UMass students were grateful for the healthcare options that are available to them on campus.

At UMass there is currently a [Women’s Health Clinic](#), a [Center for Women and Community](#), and a student-led group called [UMass Students for Reproductive Justice](#), which is a chapter of Planned Parenthood.

“It’s comforting to know that we have those resources, should we need them,” said Saleeba.

The Women’s Health Clinic is located on the ground floor of University Health Services, and offers all kinds of resources to its patients. Some of these services include STI

screening, diagnosis, and treatment, nearly all forms of birth control, troubleshooting for hormonal imbalances, and counseling for pregnancy, birth control, and eating disorders. The clinic even has care options for transgender students, or students who are in the process of transitioning.

Dr. Maria Gallo M.D. is a women's health physician at UHS, and was working at the university when the clinic first opened. "The Women's Health Clinic has actually only been around for the last three years, and it's been expanded a lot since then," she explained. "At first, it was only open for three or four half-days a week, and now it's



open full-time. We've also needed to expand physically, and other departments have actually been moved to make more space. However, because it is small, we can only have two practitioners in there at once."

Although the clinic can be tricky to find, Gallo explained that its location below the main floor of UHS was intentional. "The clinic was specifically designed to be a safe and comfortable space where people could seek help in a more private, confined place," she said.

Hannah Kaplan is a senior undergraduate student studying public health and women, gender, and sexuality, and a first year graduate student studying community health education. She occasionally works with the Women's Health Clinic when they host STI/HIV clinics, and is a co-president of UMass Students for Reproductive Justice (USRJ).

As a chapter of Planned Parenthood, USRJ helps connect people with their services and the campaigns that they run, as well as hosts on campus events that promote student involvement and activism.

Kaplan noted that USRJ plays an important role in getting students involved and giving them first-hand experience with reproductive rights. "This was the first time I had ever actually been involved with a club, and it was really interesting learning what reproductive justice looks like on a college campus instead of just generally learning about it," she said.

Katie Donegan, a UMass communications and journalism graduate, is a former co-president of USRJ. She says that her time in the club "absolutely impacted" her course career and professional goals.

"My experience lobbying at the State House with USRJ was an encouraging thing for me. One of the bills we were lobbying for was the one just passed this year that makes Massachusetts the first state to protect copay-free birth control. It made my time feel

valuable, and it was really empowering to see that legislative win. I will actually be applying to work for Planned Parenthood Boston in the spring,” she said.

Donegan also hopes that the club will continue to work closely with the Women’s Health Clinic, as it did when she was a student.

As a way to provide feedback on the clinic, USRJ created a comprehensive survey for patients to detail their experiences. “We thought the best way to fix problems at the clinic would be to work with the clinic administration,” Donegan said. She also noted that the staff were “largely receptive” to patient responses, as can be observed in the services that the clinic provides today.

Despite the availability of women’s health resources on campus, many agree that the services provided at UMass need to be publicized further to be truly effective.

Kaplan explained that there are a lot of services that are provided that students simply don’t know about. “A lot of times you have to already know about these things, often through word of mouth,” she said. “For example, you can get free rides to the nearest Planned Parenthood in Springfield, but not a lot of people know that.”

In fact, some students argue that services like the Women’s Health Clinic as a whole need to be publicized more. “Once people know about these things, I’m sure they’re very accessible, but I didn’t know there was a more specific, specialized place you could go for women’s health issues until now,” said Jillian Thomas.

And although the future of women’s healthcare may be uncertain, there’s one thing that many are agreed upon: the importance of keeping the conversation going.

Jennifer L. Nye, a former healthcare attorney and current professor at UMass Amherst who focuses on the history of reproductive rights and sex and gender discrimination law, says there are a “multitude of interdependent ways” to effectively advocate for quality women’s healthcare.

“You need grassroots activism, like what we saw when Congress tried to repeal the ACA, policy advocacy, which resulted in the ACA having the birth control mandate, and legal advocacy, when people’s rights are being violated, or the government is violating the Constitution or other laws,” Nye said.

Hannah Saleeba said, “I think it’s great that we’re talking about women’s healthcare and women’s issues. They aren’t things that are going to go away.”