

COLLABORATION ACROSS RACE IN THE REPRODUCTIVE MOVEMENT:

A Case Study of the Reproductive Health Equity Act in Oregon

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the most comprehensive reproductive health bill in the country passed the Oregon state legislature. The Reproductive Health Equity Act (House Bill 3391) includes the right to reproductive health services for all of the state's residents including undocumented and transgender people, provides full public funding for reproductive care for those ineligible for Medicaid based on citizenship status, and codifies the right to abortion. The sweeping legislation contains pre- and post-partum care, screening for breast and cervical cancer, voluntary sterilization, and counseling on relationship safety and requires private insurance companies to cover these services at no out-of-pocket cost to patients.

The passage of the Reproductive Health Equity Act (RHEA) was particularly remarkable given that two years earlier, a similar but far less inclusive bill was defeated. This case study explores what allowed for this dramatic turnaround in such a short time.

The Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon (PCCO) created RHEA, building support until it was signed into law on August 15, 2017. RHEA's passage and the work of the Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon is an example of how working across movements can result in extraordinary wins.


The Building Movement Project interviewed a dozen people who were involved in the Pro-Choice Coalition, from central players to outside supporters, and identified

four main factors that made this cross-movement mobilization a success:

1. People of color-led groups and communities played a leading role in the development and passage of the bill, countering the common misconception that supporters of reproductive health and rights concerns are primarily middle-class white women.
2. Long before RHEA was proposed, leaders in communities of color were building their relationships with one another as well as their capacity to address reproductive justice, which facilitated their entry into a predominately white reproductive rights coalition.
3. Coalition partners took time to develop shared values and identify "bottom line issues" that all agreed had to be included in the bill.
4. Opportunities—planned and unplanned—helped propel the bill forward, especially strategic and financial support from outside the state, changes in leadership in key organizations, and the presidential election of Donald Trump.

Cross-movement coalition building is difficult under the best conditions. It requires developing trust, identifying common values and goals, adopting collaborative strategies, and committing time and money to make a campaign successful. The work by the Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon to advance and pass RHEA was no exception. Yet, many PCCO participants felt depleted and even discouraged after RHEA passed, exposing the





fault lines that occurred during the process. This case study identifies lessons for similar coalitions, looking at what helped achieve RHEA's successful passage and the challenges of working in a coalition across race and issue areas.

Examples of those challenges include:

- Increased demands—both time and emotional labor—on the leadership of people of color who were already overtaxed from defending their communities against attacks and fighting for vital investments.
- Unaddressed financial and power imbalances between larger majority-white reproductive health/rights organizations and smaller, mostly people of color-led groups that were working on multiple issues affecting their communities, not solely or primarily on reproductive rights.
- Lack of resources to hire a coalition coordinator, campaign manager, or other staff to be responsible for holding the values, decisions, and process of the coalition and coordinating work to move the campaign forward.

The fact that the Pro-Choice Coalition was able to pass RHEA given the obstacles was an enormous achievement for reproductive rights. The bill's passage ultimately demonstrated how the hard work of sticking with a collaboration to fight through differences and increase trust between movements can lay the groundwork for transformational cross-movement work.



The fact that the Pro-Choice Coalition was able to pass the Reproductive Health Equity Act given the obstacles was an enormous achievement for reproductive rights.

THE SUCCESS: PASSING RHEA

Several factors led to the development and success of RHEA. Only a few years before, the white Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon increased its membership to include leaders of color, who expanded the group's vision and sharpened its focus. Adding leaders of color to the Coalition was a result of a deliberate strategy crafted by people of color from both national and local groups who convened leaders from communities of color in Oregon to deepen their understanding and commitment to reproductive issues, and provided resources for that work. Early on, the presence of powerful leaders of color, who expected to be treated as equal partners in PCCO, resulted in tensions and divisions. The process of creating RHEA was an exercise in overcoming distrust between newer and older Coalition members through agreements not to trade off pieces of the bill in legislative negotiations. The seven-organization steering committee for the Coalition was supported by a much larger group of participants who were involved in the design of the bill, contributed to one of four internal committees, or both. Finally, RHEA was helped by planned and unplanned factors from outside the coalition that increased momentum toward its passage.

PEOPLE OF COLOR LEADERSHIP: Reimagining the Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon

The Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon entered the 2017 legislative session with a bill that reflected the collective vision of its members, including leaders from communities of color who advocated for the unmet reproductive needs of their constituents. People of color representatives were part of an expanded Coalition that debated, discussed, and developed the legislation, specifying key issues that were ultimately included in the bill, such as using language that was inclusive of transgender people and extending reproductive health


to pre-natal and post-partum care. This expansion also made visible support from communities of color for passing the bill, challenging assumptions about the constituencies who cared about and were impacted by reproductive rights legislation.

The collaboration was also an opportunity for groups that had limited experience with the legislative process to expand their skills and grow their influence. People of color in the Coalition fought for and flexed their power both within and beyond the coalition. Several people of color-led groups used the opportunity of being active within the Pro-Choice Coalition to increase their presence at the statehouse and elevate other issues affecting their communities. "There was really good blowback to the legislature ... about keeping out communities of color and it kind of scared them," one person recalled. "We did the groundwork in terms of having legislative conversations in their district, and we had really good lobbying strategy, and the policy was ready."

The full participation of people of color in the Pro-Choice Coalition was hard fought and hard won, and although it was not without conflict, leaders of color ultimately opened the coalition to new policy possibilities and success.

Broadening the Coalition to Include People of Color

Like many states, Oregon's reproductive rights coalition—Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon or PCCO—had been dominated for decades by large organizations that are primarily focused on reproductive rights or have large divisions dedicated to this area, namely Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon, NARAL Pro-Choice Oregon, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Oregon. This majority-white coalition had deep policy experience and well-developed relationships with legislators who they held accountable for supporting



abortion and other forms of reproductive access in a mostly pro-abortion state. Like many single-issue coalitions, PCCO had little incentive to widen its scope to include other concerns.

That changed in 2014 when the Pro-Choice Coalition invited three new groups to join: the Western States Center (WSC), the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), and the Oregon Latino Health Coalition (OLHC). At the time, Western States Center organized a series of convenings under the coalition, We are BRAVE (Building Reproductive Autonomy and Voices for Equity), which brought together leaders in communities of color to increase their familiarity with reproductive justice. The Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon and the Oregon Latino Health Coalition were both BRAVE members. As the former director of We are BRAVE recalled, “We were the first organizations of folks of color to come onto that coalition in over 20 to 30 years.”

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Providing and ensuring access to reproductive services.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Protecting the legal rights of individuals to access reproductive health service, including abortion.

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Eliminating inequalities that impact the right to control one's body, sexuality, gender, and reproduction.

<https://www.uua.org/reproductive/action/199536.shtml>

<https://www.ncjw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/RJ-RH-RR-Chart.pdf>

<https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>

The development of BRAVE and the expansion of the Coalition reflected a larger change in reproductive health, rights, and justice efforts in Oregon. A few years earlier, the national organization All* Above All identified Oregon as a state where a more comprehensive reproductive justice agenda was possible. Led by women of color, All* Above All advocates for “lifting the bans that deny abortion coverage.” During a visit to Oregon, All* Above All staff met with the Pro-Choice Coalition members and the Western States Center, and as a result began providing financial and strategic support to lay the groundwork for change in the state’s reproductive justice organizing.

With support from All* Above All, the Western States Center’s Gender Justice Program conducted a series of interviews about reproductive issues with leaders from communities of color throughout Oregon. The results showed that people of color leading community-based groups supported reproductive rights, including abortion, providing clear counterevidence against the myth that reproductive rights are not a priority issue for communities of color. The findings led Western States Center to work with All* Above All to establish We Are BRAVE and develop a curriculum on reproductive justice for the people of color leadership it convened.

One interviewee explained that BRAVE enabled leaders of color to “both build a reproductive justice movement in Oregon and then, as the cohort really developed, think about what it means to move a proactive policy.” Another BRAVE participant who became central in the passage of RHEA credited BRAVE with introducing a new perspective on reproductive issues: “To be honest, it was the first time that I had heard the word ‘reproductive justice’... what freedom meant, and reproductive autonomy, and how to build an inclusive reproductive health movement.”

At the same time, All* Above All—after meeting with PCCO members—supported NARAL of Oregon in its efforts to respond to the external critiques that the Pro-Choice Coalition needed to include people of color. NARAL’s leadership used the investment from All* Above All to reach out to communities of color, diversify the organization’s board, and raise issues of race with NARAL’s extensive membership throughout the state. One person working for NARAL observed that “because we were tied and very committed to the work that All* Above All was funding, we at some critical times brought everyone together, recognized differences and I think realized how much we had to gain by working together.” NARAL’s efforts signaled to other PCCO members that it was a priority for the Coalition to integrate a racial justice lens into their existing work.

The efforts by BRAVE and the work on race by NARAL—one of the predominantly-white reproductive rights organizations—helped lay the groundwork for bringing people of color into PCCO. A former leader of color said engaging with PCCO made sense because “it wasn’t tokenizing and we had really nothing to lose ... The movement wasn’t inclusive of our communities and we needed to change that.” By the time the Reproductive Health Equity Act was proposed in 2017, the steering committee of the Coalition included the ACLU of Oregon, Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, Family Forward Oregon, NARAL Pro-Choice Oregon, Oregon Latino Health Coalition, Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon, and the Western States Center. As one interviewee explained, “Much of the success of the campaign was due to the fact that the Pro-Choice Coalition was opened up and that you had culturally-specific community-based organizations of folks of color at the table.”


The Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon Steering Committee (PCCO) during efforts to pass the Reproductive Health Equity Act:

- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Oregon
- Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO)
- Family Forward Oregon (FFO)
- National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) Pro-Choice Oregon
- Oregon Latino Health Coalition (OLHC)
- Planned Parenthood Advocates of Oregon
- Western States Center, on behalf of other BRAVE members

Learning from Failure

Expanding the Coalition challenged the groups involved to work out tensions generated when the new people of color organizations sought a full seat at the decision-making table. One leader in the RHEA campaign recalled that when Western States Center, APANO, and OLHC joined the Pro-Choice Coalition, the group was dominated by older white women leaders. As one interviewee described it, there was “a big generational gap that was tied to a gap or a difference in terms of race—so there was often conflict.”

The new people of color members of the Coalition disrupted the way PCCO operated, including how members navigated the legislative process. In 2015, the Pro-Choice Coalition put forward the Comprehensive



Women’s Health Bill with the people of color-focused groups that joined the coalition the previous year engaging their communities to advance the bill. A lobby day at the statehouse to show support for the legislation drew more than 400 individuals, primarily people of color, a stark contrast to reproductive advocates who had come in the past. As the bill progressed, however, some of the long-term Coalition members started to negotiate with legislators, leaving the people of color-led organizations out of the loop and informing them about changes to the bill after the fact. “We were explicitly told not to talk about abortion access, termination, a variety of things,” one member of color remembered about the pressure from white-led organizations to limit its messaging to preserve the palatability of proposed legislation. “We had just spent the last year deepening the work so we could tell our stories and to now be shamed about talking about abortion ... or access to immigrant women? We basically went to the Pro-Choice Oregon and said, ‘We’re done. We’re out.’”

One person reflecting on the process observed that “PCCO wasn’t united in 2015. I think there was a lot of mistrust in the way that the bill was put together and what negotiations happened, because the negotiations happened without us in the room ... I think that in 2015 they did it the way they wanted to do it and it was unsuccessful. We also pushed back on legislators that you can’t make decisions that cut off our communities without including us. It was kind of the first time that we challenged these historically pro-choice champions to be more inclusive and be more intersectional.”

The eventual failure to pass the 2015 bill was a blow to PCCO and to reproductive rights advocates across the state. It also resulted in a necessary pause to build what turned out to be a much stronger coalition. “The bill didn’t move forward,” one coalition member observed, “but we took that learning to say, ‘We’re not leaving anyone


The Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon Statement of Purpose:

The Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon (PCCO) seeks a collaborative relationship to advance reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice values and goals in order to provide access to abortion and all reproductive health services for all people who can become pregnant in Oregon.

Together, we seek to:

- Win concrete victories to improve access and affordability of reproductive health care, including abortion, for all Oregonians.
- Build a movement that is collaborative, strategic, and sustainable for the future of gender and racial justice.
- Build capacity and shift power by lifting lives and leadership of people most affected and vulnerable.
- Focus on the strengths of each organization and their constituency while expanding the base of support.

behind.” The coalition took a “hiatus” in 2016 to develop a set of shared values and create a charter that made its values and vision explicit. “We decided not to run a bill in 2016 because we felt like we were not ready and we actually needed to take this year to do trust building and build the best bill that we can,” one coalition member explained. “So I think by the time [the 2017] session started, we all deeply believed in our bill and felt like it was inclusive; it held the line for all the communities that we wanted [to] include.”



Overcoming distrust required difficult conversations between PCCO members about both the process of creating a new bill and what it needed to include to have a broad base of support within PCCO. As a result of these conversations, the Coalition members made a series of agreements that described the bottom line of what had to be included in the bill for it to maintain support from PCCO, and affirmed that no provisions that were critical to any group or issue area would be surreptitiously bargained away. A participant from one of the larger reproductive rights groups recalled, “I think what kept us together was that this bill felt like all of our baby and none of us were going to walk away ... We had a shared desire to see this through to the end.” Although the large coalition and its different perspectives generated tensions as the group worked toward its bottom line priorities, participants in the process recognized “the strength that everybody on the coalition brought,” as one interviewee described it, and that the relationship building was worthwhile to create a bill that reflected the needs of all the communities represented by PCCO members.

Through these conversations, the coalition identified principles that all groups could agree to. “We were very clear that we wanted to win and we were also very clear that we wanted to name the communities that would be most affected ... [to] center the experience of low-income Oregonians who are actually using the Oregon health plan,” one interviewee remembered. “We wanted to actually say the word ‘abortion’ ... We wanted to lead with our values and also lead with research.” While the coalition members were developing these agreements, organizations also conducted field work to collect petitions in support of reproductive issues, gather stories from different communities about the need for comprehensive reproductive rights, and reach out to people in rural areas who hadn’t been engaged in the efforts for the prior bill. Groups including Basic Rights Oregon—which had worked for many years with the

Western States Center—helped bring in the voices of transgender people who have been traditionally left out of conversations about reproductive rights policy.

The hard work of co-creating the RHEA bill had periods of contention, yet the commitment to work together to reach agreement started to ease some of the existing distrust between white-dominant groups and those led by people of color. One PCCO participant from a white-led group observed the process resulted in “a deep love for one another. And there’s also a deep commitment to issues. There’s some excitement that you’re pioneering some of this work, you’re on the cusp of a breakthrough. You can see the end in sight even if we’re not there yet.”

“

I think what kept us together was that this bill felt like all of our baby and none of us were going to walk away ... We had a shared desire to see this through to the end.



BUILDING THE COALITION TO WIN

As the Pro-Choice Coalition codified agreements in its charter, the process within PCCO continued to build relationships and new alliances. In addition to the relatively new steering committee members, the Pro-Choice Coalition brought in groups affiliated with BRAVE through the Western States Center. This larger table was organized within four subcommittees: policy, field, communications, and political. The steering committee—including the ACLU, Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, NARAL, Oregon Latino Health Coalition, Planned Parenthood, the Western States Center, and Family Forward Oregon—operated on consensus and led the campaign. “All of the decision-making, all of the planning, all of the lobbying efforts, all of the spearheading movement building efforts happened with those seven groups,” one PCCO participant explained. “It’s interesting to me because as messy as it was with RHEA, we all definitely had a voice and if somebody said, ‘No,’ that was taken very seriously.”

Everybody Brought Something

Several interviewees described how every coalition member contributed to the creation and passage of RHEA. “We had our wonks and we had our community organizers and we had our people who could go toe-to-toe with legislators and throw a little muscle,” one person from a large reproductive rights groups said. “We had organizations that had incredibly strong relationships with their communities, we had stories, we had direct actions and I think it really took all of it.”

A leader from a people of color-led organization echoed this sentiment. “We had different skill sets, different expertise, different partnerships and we all pulled together,” she said. “There was a ground that had already been softened by other racial justice campaigns: the organizing that we’ve been doing for years. Then there

were the allies who were very successful in passing legislation who were willing to share that support and that expertise.”

Coalition partners not only shared their expertise, they also found that participating in the coalition encouraged them to go beyond their comfort zone, creating larger organizational changes as a result of their participation. One interviewee who worked in policy at a people of color-based group observed a shift among one of the larger white-led organizations, which began to include racial justice issues in their organizing and advocacy. “If you don’t live in that political policy world, it doesn’t seem very groundbreaking, but if you do live in that world, [the changes this group made] were very risky,” she said. Simultaneously, many groups accountable to communities of color had not previously been involved in drafting legislation and meeting with legislators. The same interviewee noted that organizational leaders from communities of color invested enormous amounts of time to learn how to participate in the policy process and establish their presence at the statehouse. “Being able to hold all of those different pieces really made them a very effective anchor,” she said in reference to one of the people of color-led groups that went through the process of participating in statehouse policy efforts, “and helped weave their shared values through a lot of the strategies.”

“

There was a ground that had already been softened by other racial justice campaigns: the organizing that we’ve been doing for years.



Working Together

The comprehensive agenda included in RHEA could have easily encouraged policy tradeoffs and coalition schisms similar to what occurred in 2015. Instead, the PCCO organizations—despite a history of mistrust over a similar legislative process—honored their commitment to each other and the bill.

The key for many was the agreed-upon coalition values, which meant the groups had made clear what they were and were not willing to compromise. As an interviewee who worked closely with many of the PCCO members recalled, “I don’t think that there was boundless trust amongst all of them, but they all did, I think, act in a trustworthy manner.” Unlike many coalitions representing varied communities and constituents, she said, “nobody was selling each other out behind closed doors.”

The challenge of holding to the bottom line often meant using the bill as an educational process to introduce some of the coalition’s constituencies to new ideas. Several people noted one of the challenges was educating constituents and legislators on why the bill used gender-neutral terms such as “people who have the ability to get pregnant” in order to include the transgender community. Advocates affiliated with the larger, more traditional reproductive rights organizations questioned “why we were not saying ‘women’ every place we possible could,” one interviewee remembered. It became especially challenging when polling showed that messaging using the word “women” scored seven points higher with supporters than messaging using the word “Oregonian.” Some groups changed language to refer to “women” in their general messaging, but the gender-neutral language in the bill remained through its passage.

People of color participants in PCCO who worked on RHEA were insistent that the coalition’s media messengers reflected their identities. In several instances,

the traditional reproductive rights groups, which had more media experience and could easily generate coverage, agreed to include people of color in stories that were used to support the passage of the bill. Still, struggles over representation persisted. One example was the response within PCCO to a campaign image by a Latinx artist. The image featured people of color, leading one staffer from a white-dominated group to express that she and other white women were left out of the picture. Additionally, several of the professional on-site statehouse lobbyists suggested that the image would not resonate with legislators. Eventually the coalition agreed that the image would be used by Western States Center and BRAVE partners in their messaging, if not by the coalition at large. Ultimately, though, rather than turn off supporters, the image was a hit. One interviewee from a people of color-led group recalled that after the initial skepticism about whether legislators would respond to the materials, “eventually all these elected officials were posting [the image] everywhere.”

In spite of the differences among coalition members in their approaches, strategies, and messaging, PCCO participants continued to stay engaged with one another. The hard work of PCCO was not just creating RHEA, it was honoring the commitment to work together during the process, continually debating and agreeing on what position PCCO members would take as the bill moved forward.

PCCO MEMBERS AND BEYOND:

Support and Serendipity

The campaign for RHEA was one of many 2017 legislative efforts on topics ranging from children and youth to health care access and coverage. Support from other legislative coalitions helped advance passage of the bill.

Aligning Coalitions

Aligned work between the Pro-Choice Coalition and other efforts was a significant factor in getting RHEA over the finish line. One especially significant endorsement was from the Fair Shot Coalition, a group of more than 50 progressive organizations that chooses key proposals to support during legislative sessions. “The strength of the Fair Shot Coalition really took this to the next level because it brought so much more diversity,” one person said, including “many big players like unions.” There was also a boost to PCCO’s steering committee from the addition of Family Forward Oregon, a coalition of groups advocating on family-friendly work policies such as paid family and sick leave. “Family Forward was an organization that was certainly more political and had more political capital than us,” one interviewee said. “They eventually signed up and they absolutely facilitated the passage of the law.” Several key PCCO members also participated in the Cover All Kids coalition, and helped

“

The strength of the Fair Shot Coalition really took this to the next level because it brought so much diversity.


assure that the two campaigns were not pitted against each other by legislators asking for tradeoffs between bills with similar constituencies. Some interviewees noted that partners in other coalitions initially hesitated to join the RHEA campaign but came on board as it gained momentum. Even very late endorsements—from some union groups, for example—helped with the ultimate passage of the bill.

Changes in Leadership

Leadership changes in member organizations of the Pro-Choice Coalition brought new perspectives that helped the coalition stay focused and resolve challenges. New people in decision-making roles brought a fresh viewpoint that was unencumbered by past tensions or challenges that predated the expansion of the Coalition. One interviewee recalled feeling relief that the recently hired head of her organization approached conflict resolution in a non-combative manner, which she described as “well, let’s figure out how to do this together.” Another interviewee said that leadership changes in a few organizations were “a breath of fresh air” to many PCCO members who saw that organizations that had previously been at odds were able to collaborate effectively, as their leaders “weren’t constantly trying to grab the mic from each other.” New leadership with a capacity for collaboration and a strong commitment to PCCO allowed the coalition to develop and stick with “a bigger and more ambitious bill.”

The 2016 Election Effect

Almost everyone interviewed for this report cited the reaction to the election of Donald Trump as a factor that generated new energy for the passage of RHEA. After the election, there was massive turnout for the Women’s March in Oregon, and the confirmation of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court made the prospect of an anti-abortion Supreme Court more immediate.



The new political landscape pushed the Democratic legislature and governor to show constituents they were ready to act to defend reproductive rights. As one PCCO member reflected: “We ran a really amazing, powerful campaign. As it was happening, we were like, ‘Would this be happening if Trump hadn’t been elected?’ And I think it’s impossible to know but, for better or for worse, there was a ton of grassroots energy that hadn’t been there before.” Along with changes at the federal level, there were also progressive changes in the state. A woman governor, Kate Brown, was elected in 2016 as the first openly LGBT governor in the country. Another woman, Jennifer Williamson—a longtime reproductive rights advocate and a supporter of the bill—became the Oregon House majority leader. An interviewee familiar with the Oregon legislature described Williamson as “a very smart strategist” on behalf of the coalition’s efforts. For example, one PCCO member described how Williamson helped groups understand the details of the process. “She made sure that the coalition got ahead of the budget hearing,” she said. “Our people are never in those kind of budget conversations, but that is where all the real decisions got made.”

Dedicated work and commitment among PCCO members, national support that bolstered engagement on reproductive rights issues in the state, and a changing political climate all helped with the passage of RHEA. Its success was a remarkable achievement, but it took a toll on the members of Pro-Choice Coalition Oregon.



New people in decision-making roles brought a fresh viewpoint that was unencumbered by past tensions or challenges that predated the expansion of the Coalition.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

The RHEA campaign was exciting and exhausting, as coalition members worked through their differences while pushing the legislation forward. Several of those deeply involved in PCCO reported that after the bill's passage they were at best drained and at worst unsure about the possibilities of working with coalition partners in the future. Looking back, interviewees identified three main difficulties that lingered for RHEA participants: the demands on people of color, the power imbalances between groups, and the lack of resources within the campaign itself.

Confronting Race


Interviewees frequently discussed or alluded to issues of race and racism that were present in the process of creating and passing RHEA. This is no surprise given some of the significant dynamics in play: the fact that PCCO had previously been led by white-dominant groups; the disconnect between a reproductive rights framework focused on the legal protection of abortion and reproductive care as compared to a reproductive justice framework that seeks not just the legal right to reproductive care but that these services also be meaningfully accessible to all people at their discretion; and the overarching legacy of racism in the United States and in Oregon, which one white woman interviewee described as “less sexist than it is a racist state.”

The inclusion of people of color-led and -focused groups into the Pro-Choice Coalition made RHEA possible, but it did so by confronting the coalition's status quo. People of color, especially those on the steering committee, said they were frequently challenging assumptions made by white-dominant groups, which required constant vigilance and enormous energy. As one interviewee described it, “The way the coalition worked and the dynamics inside the coalition and the way that women of color had to do the emotional labor to help white people

deal with their s—t was exhausting and unpleasant and repetitive.”

Another interviewee, a member of BRAVE, said that traditional reproductive rights groups were often resistant to change and dismissed demands to be more inclusive from the people of color-led groups. She described that she and other people of color-focused groups in PCCO endured pushback from white-dominant reproductive rights organizations. “A big goal of BRAVE was to push that movement and to cultivate leaders that felt strong enough to [challenge the dominant frame],” she said. “That was a really ambitious goal.”

Several people of color interviewees expressed discomfort that there was no Black-led group in PCCO and that, outside the coalition, some of the state's larger people of color-led groups were not involved—at least initially—in advocating for the bill. “What does it mean,” one interviewee asked, to be “working under the reproductive justice banner when there is no Black-led group in the Pro-Choice Coalition and, at times, within the BRAVE coalition.” Another pointed out that BRAVE participants included a Black parents group and, initially, the Urban League of Portland. In the end, the Urban League had too little capacity to continue in the BRAVE cohort, which illustrates a deeper problem. As one observer noted, historically there was little support for Black-led and -focused organizations in Oregon, especially those involved in policy work. Even those groups that might have been aligned with the coalition's efforts had limited capacity to be part of PCCO. Eventually groups including the Urban League of Portland, NAACP of Portland, and Black Parent Initiative all endorsed RHEA.



Some white leadership and staff found it difficult to understand the skepticism and hesitation that women of color continued to express about the collaboration as the bill moved forward. Interviewees working in white-dominant groups acknowledged the importance of expanding the coalition to include people of color-focused organizations and expressed frustration about ongoing tensions. Several of the white interviewees believed the lack of trust from people of color in the coalition was a result of the views and actions of prior leaders and staff in white-dominant organizations, and they struggled with how to move beyond those issues.

For many people of color in the coalition, though, it was not simply about the individuals in partner organizations, but about contending with a history where the needs of people of color were marginalized. One person noted the distinction between bringing people of color into the coalition versus actually challenging the assumptions and power of white people who had traditionally been in leadership in the coalition and in general. “Moving a multiracial coalition process within the context of a very, very white state—Oregon, it’s actually not that white, but the culture is very white,” she said. “And I think when people see their power is being threatened and they want to pretend that it’s not about race, but it’s about ‘new people’—I mean, those things are exactly the same, right? But they just don’t want to say it out loud or they don’t want to believe that the two are connected.”

Who Has Power


Issues of race often played out via disparities in resources and access to decision-makers among white-led groups and those run by people of color. NARAL and Planned Parenthood—two of the longtime players in PCCO—had larger budgets, more staff, and were primarily focused on reproductive-related concerns. Both organizations, along with the multi-issue ACLU, had a long history of working

with the legislature on policy, and each had dedicated statehouse lobbyists.

In contrast, the Western States Center, APANO, and OLHC were smaller organizations, and were integrating reproductive justice into an already full policy agenda. APANO and OLHC were part of the Oregon Health Equity Alliance (OHEA), whose state lobbyist worked with the Pro-Choice Coalition, but the OHEA team and lobbyist were often pulled in other directions by competing priorities. Western States was newer to working in the statehouse and did not have the relationships with legislators that other groups, and particularly their lobbyists, had already developed.

“There were a lot of people that worked in culture-shift work and movement building and organizing. We had a lot of that experience,” one interviewee said. “What our movement in Oregon didn’t have, in terms of communities of color: we were starting to get more politicized, more working on political campaigns; we were starting to do more health equity policy work. So we also had a lack of policy experience.”

Many interviewees mentioned the gap between those organizations with expertise about the legislative process and relationships with legislators, and those who were new to policy efforts, particularly in regard to the power held by the predominately white “in-building” lobbyists working on RHEA. BRAVE coalition participants had been successful in including the needs of their communities into RHEA, but were suspicious of what might happen when they were not in the room despite the agreed upon bottom lines. “There was some contention [with] the in-building decision-makers ... who were all white folks,” one interviewee said. “They were all people who held positions of power in their organizations versus the individuals from culturally-specific community-based organizations who were not in-building and not part of



those decisions.” Another interviewee observed that “within the coalition I would say we definitely had equal decision-making power.” Once work began with outside stakeholders, though, she said, “who was actually doing the lobbying was definitely skewed and so that may have changed our ability to actually be seen as having power by decision-makers in the building.”

In contrast, some interviewees from white-led groups felt there was a lack of recognition for the contributions their organizations made to the political work inside the statehouse. “I do credit the political muscle that we brought to this, and I think that sometimes the story that was told nationally didn’t focus so much on the political muscle because that’s not an interesting story,” one white interviewee observed. “They made it sound more like it was the sort of real grassroots effort, and I think there was a lot of grassroots organizing ... that went into making this bill be as successful as it was. But I think that the reality is you have to have in-the-building experiences.”

Issues of power and feelings of mistrust were predictable given the history of PCCO. A person of color interviewee noted that the power dynamics carried into the RHEA process reflected the controversy PCCO members experienced during prior attempts at collaboration. Referring back to struggles that preceded the bill, one Coalition member explained, “Giving up power is not easy and people don’t like it and it causes a lot of problems.” She continued, “I saw that happen again and again and again, where people’s power was threatened and it led them to make bad decisions, and decisions that did not benefit the greater good. And that was unfortunate.”

“


Giving up power is not easy and people don’t like it and it causes a lot of problems.

Lack of Funding - Especially for Campaign Staff

Many interviewees felt that tensions in the Pro-Choice Coalition would have been better addressed if there had been funds to hire a coalition coordinator or campaign manager. Because no single person held responsibility to build and mediate relationships, track decisions and commitments, and orient new staff members to the history and values of PCCO, these tasks fell to already overtaxed coalition members.

Most of the facilitation and note-taking in coalition meetings was done by a Planned Parenthood staffer who felt a tension between being affiliated with one PCCO organization and responsible for holding a neutral role for the whole coalition. “It’s challenging for one of the member organizations to be the one creating draft content for things,” she said, “without it seeming like that organization is trying to drive the show as opposed to simply filling the capacity gap.”

Another coalition member thought the person in this role “did a really good job of trying to ensure that we met monthly, that agendas were out, etc.” but didn’t have either the authority or capacity to make the strategic decisions that a campaign manager or coordinator could have made. “They didn’t really have decision-making power to say ‘Hey, you know what? This meeting we really just want to dedicate to relationship building so we can build trust.’”



The lack of funding also affected organizations whose small budgets and multi-issue focus meant that staff were putting in long hours to participate in the coalition. BRAVE provided modest funding to its participating organizations, but not specifically for joining PCCO, and the support was not enough to cover the investment of staff time and resources that advocating for RHEA required. Without funding, smaller groups had limited opportunities to invest time to develop skills in areas like policy advocacy that were new to many of the BRAVE organizations. “These collaboratives require resources,” one interviewee said, “[so] that organizations can build our own expertise on this.”

“

...in the great scheme of things,
we passed the bill we wanted
and dreamed of and I think that’s
what matters...

Funding could have also brought more voices to the PCCO table. One group led by and focused on people of color was located far from Portland, where most of the coalition meetings took place, and was constrained in its participation because of the logistical and financial challenge of joining coalition efforts in person. “Our involvement in the campaign was much more limited than I would’ve liked,” one leader said, “because of the funding, the lack of having a strong team of organizers to mobilize the community.” Despite not having new resources, groups found other ways to contribute. This same interviewee noted that they used their existing resources to engage in “community education,

community awareness, trying to focus on changing the cultural conversation, especially in the Latino community, around issues of reproductive health.”

The fact that PCCO members were facing these difficulties made the success of RHEA even more significant. “The coalition had a lot of challenges, even when we were united,” one interviewee noted. “But in the great scheme of things, we passed the bill we wanted and dreamed of and I think that’s what matters... I feel like we did really well for our communities.”

AFTER RHEA

The story of the passage of the Reproductive Health Equity Act was told in different ways, but there was agreement that the key factor in its success was the broadening of the all-white leadership of the Pro-Choice Coalition to include people of color in the decision-making process. As a result, the ambitions of the state's movement expanded from a more limited reproductive rights framework focused on legal protection to an expansive agenda to include the accessibility and availability of care. "Nobody was really thinking big around reproductive justice in Oregon, so this was huge," one interviewee said. "This bill was enormous, and [people of color-led groups]—really understanding the gender justice barriers that people were facing—conceived of an extremely creative bill and expansive elements that never would have happened without them at the table—impossible."

RHEA was immediately a beacon for others in the reproductive health, rights, and justice movements. But within the Pro-Choice Coalition, groups struggled to collectively claim their win.

Pro-Choice Coalition Goes Dormant

After RHEA was passed and signed into law, Pro-Choice Coalition members were exhausted. The steering committee and other coalition members participated in a three-hour facilitated call to discuss the campaign and victory. One person of color said the call was inadequate given the extent of the work PCCO participants had devoted to RHEA over the previous months. She recalled it as "very brief, because we didn't end up, after the bill was passed, even having a sit-down with all the folks in the coalition." Some of the larger reproductive rights groups had celebrations with their constituencies, but as one coalition member described it, "we never really got to have a full celebration as a coalition, or ability or opportunity to debrief."

Another interviewee observed that the Pro-Choice Coalition had not met since RHEA passed and suggested that this meant something significant about its structure and relationships. "After we won that really big f—cking thing, and for it to go dormant after that, at the height of when you had relationships and power, to me says something," she said. "I'm not sure exactly what, but it definitely says something."

One person thought the coalition's lack of engagement after RHEA was the result of the tension that was present throughout the process. "Some of that dissipated when we ended up passing the bill as we wrote it, fully funded," she said. "We showed that we, as a coalition, showed up really unified and didn't allow the legislators to tear our bill apart." But the success of the bill didn't resolve mistrust and bad feelings, or the enormous energy needed to pass the bill. "Once RHEA happened, our coalition pretty much dissipated," she said. "I think it was just too much."

Passing RHEA was a huge accomplishment, and interviewees expressed appreciation for their success. But the toll it took was evident in the immediate aftermath of the campaign. Some groups felt overwhelmed by what it took to participate in the effort and stepped back to build their capacity, manage changes in leadership, or reconsider organizational priorities. No one called members together after RHEA became law, so the Pro-Choice Coalition stopped meeting. Some interviewees suggested PCCO dissolved because it had served its purpose or that there was simply not a clear next step propelling the group forward; others thought there was too much lingering tension. The next year, however, a new group was formed to fight a ballot initiative that intended to roll back a key provision of RHEA.

Ballot Measure 106

In 2018, anti-abortion groups were able to introduce Ballot Measure 106, which sought to prevent abortion coverage for state employees and Oregonians on public health plans such as Medicaid, having a disproportionate impact on low-income people. The No Cuts to Care coalition, which was created to oppose the measure, included most of the RHEA steering committee members and others. The Oregon Latino Health Coalition, which was experiencing a leadership change and priority assessment, did not join the coalition. A former employee speculated that OLHC also found the \$50,000 membership fee for members of Not Cuts to Care a deterrent. New coalition member organizations that had not been active in PCCO included the SEIU, the Oregon Nurses Association, and Forward Together, a group led by women of color. Membership fees and funds raised from other supporters gave No Cuts to Care a solid financial base that exceeded the resources that had been available during the RHEA campaign. In addition, the specific nature of the attack and the short time frame to mobilize people to vote against Ballot Measure 106, called for a short, focused, and unified campaign.

The previous work on the RHEA campaign provided a foundation for the No Cuts to Care coalition. One member of the PCCO steering committee reflected, “I think those preexisting relationships, even though they hadn’t sustained, were warm enough that you could deploy them.” She added, “I think the other thing that helped, because we had resources, [was that] we were able to hire six campaign staff pretty quick.” Another interviewee from a reproductive rights group credited the coalition’s effectiveness to the model in which “people had significant financial buy-in and expectations of the executive committee,” and campaign staff could provide guidance and ultimately make decisions if conflicts arose.

“

... those preexisting relationships, even though they hadn’t sustained, were warm enough that you could deploy them.

Communities of color were engaged in the fight against Ballot Measure 106 from the beginning. Smaller organizations that did not have the resources or staffing to directly join No Cuts to Care participated through structures developed by coalition members. For example, early in the campaign, Forward Together created a field program that knocked on 16,000 doors in communities of color for “long-form conversations about abortion.” One woman of color who had been a member of PCCO, but not of No Cuts to Care, volunteered to engage in the door-knocking effort. She described how moved she was by the way people reacted positively to outreach from another person of color. “Their responsiveness to just opening the door to me and saying, ‘Wow, usually the folks that are talking to me about this are white folks’ or ‘It’s really amazing to see someone who either looks like me or even has brown hair and brown eyes,’” she said. “I really enjoyed that.”

Many people of color-led organizations that had been in PCCO but not in No Cuts to Care supported the coalition’s efforts and asked to be kept updated on the work. “There was an explicit and clear trust that they indicated was built as a result of our 2017 RHEA campaign,” said one person from a larger reproductive rights group. “And so that, obviously, felt really good.” Ballot Measure 106 was defeated with a 64% no vote against the measure, garnering more votes than any other issue or candidate on the 2018 ballot.

LESSONS FOR CROSS-MOVEMENT ORGANIZING


The creation and passage of RHEA was an extraordinary accomplishment, and not without difficulties. What made the Oregon efforts so successful—and what also generated tensions—was the inclusion of people of color-led groups that could inform the process and bring in new constituencies to create a larger base of support. How did this happen? Below are five lessons about the time and support needed to engage in cross-movement work on reproductive justice.

1. Inclusion Takes Investment: The RHEA campaign was notable because the Pro-Choice Coalition, which was predominately white, brought in groups led by and focused on communities of color—and these groups had a major impact on the coalition’s direction and work. Just bringing groups to the table does not mean they are included in the process. White-dominant groups often find it difficult to change how they operate to truly listen to and integrate the ideas and needs of communities of color. For people of color entering white-dominant spaces, insisting on real impact and remaining engaged despite resistance to change requires a deep commitment, and support from others to stay in the process. In this case, the We are BRAVE cohort, which convened years before RHEA was proposed, offered communities of color a place to reflect on and discuss reproductive issues. The BRAVE coalition took the time needed to build relationships among people of color who, in turn, could together generate ideas on how to address issues they faced in common. BRAVE was a “place for so many of us to come and talk about reproductive rights and justice” one interviewee said, “and we never had a place to do that.” Interviewees from BRAVE noted that capacity-building money—though small compared to the need—facilitated their involvement in the RHEA campaign. BRAVE was not an educational program; it was a place to develop strategies to counter reproductive policies that negatively impacted

communities of color. BRAVE helped groups build power, providing opportunities for involvement at a legislative level. All* Above All played a significant role by offering both resources and strategic support to both BRAVE and NARAL, which used its funds to reach out to people of color communities. Ultimately PCCO opened up the all-white leadership and organizations from BRAVE were ready to step in. It took an investment—money, strategy, energy, power—to make this work.

2. Making Agreements: To successfully work across movements—in this case to include the perspectives and needs of communities of color—the groups in PCCO developed principles, practices, and bottom line agreements that guided the coalition’s work. These principles and agreements were put in place to ensure that key issues for communities of color were not bargained away in the legislative process. This challenged white organizations to act differently in situations where they dominated decision-making in the past, such as their access to resources and legislators. These agreements did not erase power imbalances or inequities, but codifying shared values and understandings can help coalitions stem divisive dynamics that often leave less-resourced groups feeling ignored or betrayed. Acknowledging different goals and assumptions, and then working together to identify some bottom lines and non-negotiable demands lays a foundation for building relationships and trust. This can be the most contentious and challenging part of the process, but if successful, these agreements can help resolve future conflict and avoid irreparable rifts.

3. Progress Takes Time ... And Sometimes Failure: Working on reproductive health, rights and justice is challenging even in a pro-abortion state like Oregon. Progress takes time and requires a high tolerance for failure. The bold and inclusive design of RHEA and the



ambitious campaign for its passage was in part based on the failure of the 2015 reproductive rights bill, after which the Pro-Choice Coalition stepped back and took time to make necessary agreements to move forward with more ambitious goals. Unfortunately, the contentious nature of reproductive health, rights, and justice work means that success will often generate a backlash from forces that oppose reproductive freedom. Anti-abortion forces were ready with Ballot Measure 106 the year after RHEA passed. In the current political climate, many “wins” will need to be reinforced and defended after the main legislative battle, a cycle that can help cross-movement coalitions continue to learn and grow, deepen relationships, and expand the ways they successfully work together.

4. Think Big and Be Strategic: Cross-movement work often begins as transactional, in which participants support each other’s efforts for mutual gain. The inclusion of people of color in the Pro-Choice Coalition began in this transactional vein, with the existing white-dominated leadership of the coalition making few efforts to build beyond superficial engagement with new partners. When people of color-led groups stepped back from the coalition during 2015 efforts because of frustrations that their needs and perspectives were not a factor in the coalition’s decisions, the subsequent reflection, discussion, and eventual conflict resolution led to a deeper commitment to and capacity for real collaboration. The pause during that period of reflection allowed PCCO groups the space to decide to shift goals from a more limited reproductive rights agenda determined largely by a tactical analysis of what was legislatively possible to a more expansive and ambitious bill that reflected the real needs of communities affected by reproductive injustice, and to develop a viable strategy to make it possible.

5. Money Matters: The long-term work it takes to build cross-movement coalition requires funds. Investments in under-resourced groups to be able to participate, facilitation/campaign coordination, and space to rethink strategy and goals can have a substantial payoff for these collaborative efforts. The RHEA win left organizations completely depleted. Fighting Ballot 106, built on the success of RHEA, was a more energizing campaign; however it was reactive, short-term, and required a \$50,000 buy-in, leaving out groups—especially people of color-focused groups—that were already stretched for funds. Resources for tactical work is important; and it does not take the place of support for addressing the underlying structures of deep inequality. It takes additional resources over a period of time to develop the vision and strategies for changing systems of power and to build the capacity of groups to make this transformation a lasting reality.

The passage of RHEA was a huge win for reproductive health, rights, and justice, and it included provisions that might have once been seen as unobtainable. The experience with RHEA was far from perfect, but it opens a window to understanding the hard work that needs to take place, and is possible to achieve, to join across movements to successfully fight for racial, economic, gender, and social justice.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by the Building Movement Project's Co-Director, Frances Kunreuther, with extensive support from Senior Researcher Ofronama Biu who also conducted the majority of the interviews. BMP thanks all the individuals who talked with us about their involvement in passing Oregon's Reproductive Health Equity Act, especially members of the Pro-Choice Coalition of Oregon. Their generosity in sharing their experiences and reflections made possible the creation of this case study. Julia DiLaura provided editorial support for the report.



Building Movement Project

For more information, please visit
The Building Movement Project at
www.buildingmovement.org

or contact us at
info@buildingmovement.org



2020