

“Short-term political gain is going to have long-term terrible consequences for women.”

Cecile Richards is president of Planned Parenthood and the public face of the organization during battles this year over funding in Congress and several statehouses.

Richards joined Planned Parenthood in 2006, and previously worked as deputy chief of staff for U.S. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi. She also founded America Votes, a coalition of national grassroots organizations that works to increase voter registration and participation. She is the daughter of former Texas Governor Ann Richards.

STATE LEGISLATURES: When Indiana lawmakers voted to cut off Medicaid funding to Planned Parenthood, were you surprised?

CECILE RICHARDS: I have been surprised—particularly at a time when the economy is in such dire straits, when pretty much every voter’s primary concern is getting the country back to work—at how state legislatures have been focused on repealing women’s access to basic health care.

SL: Do you anticipate more such legislation in 2012?

RICHARDS: We’ve seen more than 1,000 bills filed in state legislatures in 49 states during this session on issues of reproductive health care. Even though the Indiana legislature passed that bill and Governor Daniels signed it, I think what is important is that the federal government has been very swift and direct in its analysis, which is that it violates Medicaid law. This is discriminatory and illegal. I think it is going to have a bit of a chilling effect on those legislatures playing political games with the Medicaid access issue, because now they are putting their Medicaid programs at risk.

Editor’s note: This interview is one in a series of conversations with opinion leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity.



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SL: In the past, has any state tried to cut Planned Parenthood out of Medicaid?

RICHARDS: No. We see 3 million patients a year, and many of them either qualify for Medicaid, are low income or have no health insurance. If you tell women on Medicaid they can’t go to Planned Parenthood for cancer screenings and for birth control, in a lot of parts of the country there is nowhere else to go.

SL: So you think Planned Parenthood is under more assault at the state level now than in the past?

RICHARDS: Absolutely. This short-term political gain is going to have long-term terrible consequences for women and I think terrible consequences for the folks who are pushing these kinds of measures. We are a mainstream, essential provider of health care to them and their families, and a lot of women are just completely perplexed at why lawmakers would try to start playing politics at a time when women need affordable care.

SL: What do you see as the key consequences of stopping state funding for Planned Parenthood?

RICHARDS: First is obviously the preventive care. This is the best investment we make as a country. It’s how you detect cancer early and you save

lives and you save money. Second, for every dollar you invest in family planning, you save almost \$4 in other costs that result from an unintended pregnancy. During the congressional debate, we said if women can no longer go to Planned Parenthood it will cost the federal taxpayers a minimum of \$175 million to replace those services. And unintended teen pregnancies cost \$10 billion a year. Just as the U.S. Senate was voting on this issue, CNN's own poll showed that 65 percent of voters supported continuing funding for Planned Parenthood. Voters can't figure out why Congress is trying to deny women access to Pap smears instead of getting the country back to work.

SL: Have you given any consideration to stopping abortion services since this is the key in opposing funding for Planned Parenthood?

RICHARDS: Most of the folks we are talking about don't want to fund family planning either, so I think it's the beginning of a long slope downward of trying to deny women access to any kind of reproductive health

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care. Planned Parenthood has been the most respected provider of reproductive health care for 95 years in America. We operate just like hospitals and all other medical facilities. We provide women with all their reproductive health care needs, and we think it is important that women be able to get all their care to live the healthiest lives they can and plan their families. We sit squarely in the mainstream of medical services in America. And that's our mission.

SL: Do you think the debate in Congress helped push this issue in the states?

RICHARDS: I think the congressional hysteria certainly fueled the state activity. But I think

what we're seeing across the country is, for rational, mainstream Republicans, a nightmare. Focusing on ending family planning is not where the voters are.

SL: You've had a tough year. Did your mother ever give you advice that has helped get you through the last several months?

RICHARDS: I was thinking about her the other day, because one of the things she really believed in politics is you have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. So it's important not to close the door because you never know. You turn around and someone who was against you on one thing then comes out and is your strongest supporter. On our battle in Congress the most courageous people were folks who may not agree with us on everything else, but who stood so strong for us. 

SL ONLINE

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