

**Summary of Forum: Why Vote? Reproductive and Civil Rights**  
September 13, 2022 | 6 p.m., Madison College Goodman South

Panelists:

- **Cynthia Lin**, Vice President of Women’s Medical Fund (WMF) Wisconsin and Deputy Director of Movement Building at the National Network of Abortion Funds (NNAF)
- **Katrina Morrison**, Director of Policy, Advocacy & Outreach at The Foundation for Black Women’s Wellness
- **Nicole Safar**, Executive Director of Law Forward
- **Amy Williamson**, Associate Director of the UW Collaborative for Reproductive Equity (UW CORE)

Moderator:

- **Joy Cardin**, League member and former Wisconsin Public Radio host, will moderate this event.

Welcome by **Barb Feeney, President of LWV of Dane County**. LWV is a nonpartisan organization that does not support or oppose candidates or parties but does take positions on issues. Since 1983, the League of Women Voters of the United States has stated that it “believes that public policy in a pluralistic society must affirm the constitutional right of privacy of the individual to make reproductive choices.”

President Feeney introduced **Executive Directory Wendy Hathaway**. She has been a volunteer with the WMF for years. League position is that “all people deserve access to abortion care when they need it, on a timeline of their choosing, and in a community and environment where they trust and feel safe.”

**Louise Robbins** presented the Land Acknowledgement Statement:

In owning our past and charting our future, we, the League of Women Voters of Dane County, recognize the Indigenous Peoples who are the original stewards of the lands on which we now live, while we struggle to learn more about the current and ongoing context of colonialism. League formation began more than a century ago, in 1920, with women’s suffrage, but nearly two centuries ago, even prior to the 1848 creation of the State of Wisconsin, an 1832 treaty forced the Ho-Chunk to cede their territory of Teejop (Four Lakes). Both the federal and state governments repeatedly but unsuccessfully sought to forcibly remove the Ho-Chunk from Wisconsin.

Truth and acknowledgment are critical to building mutual respect and connections across all barriers of heritage and difference.

We continue this effort to acknowledge what has been buried by honoring the truth. In Dane County, we are all standing on the stolen ancestral lands of the Ho-Chunk People.

We pay respect to their elders past, present, and future. Please take a moment to consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring us together today.

A working group is being formed within LWV Dane County to acknowledge past trauma, while nurturing present and future commitment to action, working together to understand the histories and priorities of Indigenous communities. LWVDC is grateful for the past, present, and future guidance of Wisconsin's Native Nations.

**Cardin:** I am a member of the Dane County League Program Committee and a Board member of the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin and a retired Wisconsin Public Radio talk show host.

We will discuss with our four panelists, and with you, the legal, social, political, and health consequences of the Supreme Court ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade* - how it is affecting us in Wisconsin, and what we can do about it. How can we restore reproductive freedom and what can we do to help provide access to reproductive health care services in the meantime? We welcome your questions, your suggestions, and your experiences. Those of you who are attending in person, please write your questions and comments on the cards provided to you - and someone will pick them up and get them to me. Those of you joining us virtually, please put your question or comment in the chat feature and I will present them to our panelists. We have with us tonight:

**Cynthia Lin**, Vice President of the WMF (Women's Medical Fund) and Deputy Director of Movement Building at the National Network of Abortion Funds.

**Katrina Morrison**, Director of Policy, Advocacy and Outreach at the Foundation for Black Women's Wellness.

**Nicole Safar**, Executive Director of Law Forward

**Amy Williamson**, Associate Director of the UW Collaborative for Reproductive Equity (CORE)

Thank you for being with us tonight. I would like to start by having you tell our audience more about yourself and your organization, please include the work you do or have done regarding reproductive rights, health, or access, and why the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is so concerning to you and your organization.

**Lin:** Thank you for inviting us to be part of this forum though it's terrible to be here in these circumstances. WMF is one of three abortion funds that work out of Wisconsin. WMF helps people who can't afford the cost of an abortion. We assist with travel, lodging, childcare, lost wages, and the cost of the abortion. We obtain funds largely through grassroots fundraising. WMF has been around since 1972. In the last couple of years, we have helped around 1,000 people seeking abortion and that number will grow.

National Network of Abortion Funds is an umbrella organization for abortion funds that provides assistance to those seeking abortion and works on making political change. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is important to these organizations because it will only increase the need for assistance, especially among those with low incomes.

**Morrison:** I'm with the Foundation for Black Women's Wellness as the Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Outreach. The Foundation just celebrated its ten-year anniversary. The focus of the Foundation is to help eliminate the disparities affecting the health of black women, our families, and communities. Everything we do is rooted in our vision of a world in which black women are healthy thriving and free. The overturn of *Roe* is so important because for black women the right to abortion and reproductive freedom is really about having the right to control our own bodies. Since the moment black women were brought to U.S. as enslaved people, we have not had control over our bodies. Black women were experimented on without anesthesia because medical belief was that black women don't feel pain. This belief is perpetuated today. Black women were forcibly sterilized and subject to eugenics movements and coercive birth control practices. Black women's bodily autonomy has not been respected. The perspective of black women has been missing from the movement for reproductive rights. Morrison is a third-year law student at UW-Madison and serves on the WMF Board of Directors.

**Safar:** The overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, has been weighing on my mind for a long time. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away, those of us in the repro rights movement knew this day would come. But it was still a shock when it did. Wisconsin is now a state without abortion access. Most of my career has been about building power for reproductive freedom. I spent 14 years working for Planned Parenthood, two years in the state Department of Health and Human Services, and recently made the move to focus more broadly on connecting the dots between the erosion of democratic rights and reproductive rights. I now work for Law Forward, a pro-democracy nonprofit that does impact litigation and legal support to advance our democracy. Erosion of democracy is related to the erosion of fundamental freedoms, such as bodily autonomy. We believe in the story of democracy in our country but our governmental system allows minority factions to impose their will on the majority by the filibuster and gerrymandering. Our Constitution was written by white men who believed they could own others as property, including Africans, native people and women. Many right-wing organizations have a coordinated and well-funded effort to maintain power in wealthy white few by subverting our elections and taking away other freedoms.

**Williamson:** I work for UW in the Department of Ob-Gyn with a research organization called Collaborative for Reproductive Equity. Examine effect of policies regarding reproduction on society. We seek to elevate reproductive health and justice in this country. There is very strong evidence that abortion restrictions have a devastating impact on people, on their futures, on their children's futures, on their communities. Denying people autonomy hurts those who have less power much more than those who have more power. Having reproductive autonomy is needed to achieve one's life goals and to live with dignity.

**Cardin:** From your perspective, what are the most serious consequences of the US Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v Wade*? What's happening right now?

**Williamson:** The research is clear that abortion denials negatively impact those who were denied an abortion. The Turnaway Study, conducted over 5 years of follow-up with over 1,000 people, showed that the denial had negative impacts on their security, their income level, education level, family relationships, children with developmental problems. Their children are more likely to be low income also. Hearing already about the impacts of the law. State law prohibits abortion in all cases except to save the life of the mother. But that line is not clear. After Texas law, which prohibits abortion after 6 weeks, providers are reporting heart-breaking stories about women who have a pregnancy emergency. This is not a drill, it's happening. Those who face racism will be hurt the most. Low-income people don't have the means to obtain an abortion in the face of restrictive laws.

**Safar:** The legal uncertainty that pregnant women face is creating an environment of fear and uncertainty. It's harder for nurses and practitioners to get the training they need to treat pregnant patients; it's harder for those who don't have access to affordable insurance. Amount of substandard reproductive care is stunning. It's a disservice to women that we don't provide adequate information about reproductive health care. We have accepted substandard health care. Catholic hospitals have taken over many hospitals and now refuse to provide abortions. That has been accepted, but we can do better than that. We need to provide good reproductive health care to women from the day they get their period to the day they don't have periods anymore.

**Morrison:** Reproductive justice is a term coined in the 1990s by a group of black women. It is defined by Sister Song as the right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, the right to have children or not and to parent children in safe and sustainable environments. Reproductive justice recognizes that there are a variety of factors that affect whether women have access to good health care: race, gender, religion, age. These are social identities that have been constructed in our society and they may limit access to health care. Black women have the most disparate access to health care in our state. Black people are more likely to be targeted when pregnancy is criminalized, including prosecution for miscarriages. Criminalization of abortion will hurt black pregnant people the most. Black people are now overrepresented in criminal justice system. Criminalizing abortion will only add to that, hurting black women and their families. Abortion restriction increases the risk of delivering a low birth rate baby. In Wisconsin, black babies are three times more likely to die before their first birthday than white babies. That is the worst in the nation. Black maternal mortality will increase by 39% under a total abortion ban. In Wisconsin, black mothers are already five times more likely to die in childbirth or from pregnancy complications. That level is unacceptable and will get worse with an abortion ban. Black women's pain today is not believed, especially in maternal care. Even celebrities like Beyonce and the Williams sisters have experienced medical treatment that did not acknowledge their pain and put them in danger. An average black mother is even more at risk. When people are denied

a wanted abortion they are more likely to stay in an abusive relationship. Black women experience more violence in intimate relationships. Among pregnant women, violence is the leading cause of death. This is not a hypothetical, this is already happening. This situation has been worsened by our failure to ensure that black women have had medical care that will help them to live healthy, long lives.

**Lin:** We haven't looked enough at the effect of abortion restrictions on black women. We need to place at the center the needs of black women. Wisconsin is one of 12 states in which people are not able to access abortion care in any clinical setting except for very limited circumstances. Limited options are available for people who are pregnant and don't want to be: they can call a clinic in Illinois or Minnesota. They will need to pay for transportation and an overnight stay, figure out childcare, may lose wages, and pay for the cost of the abortion. They may be able to go to a clinic and get medication abortion. These options can delay their access. Some choose self-managed abortion. There should be no criminalization for those seeking or helping those obtain an abortion. WMF website, <https://wiabortionfund.org/>, has information about resources available to Wisconsin residents. Criminal risk perpetuates punishment for those seeking bodily autonomy. Wisconsin does not have a law like Texas which allows for civil suits against those who seek or provide abortions.

**Cardin:** Was there a big increase in donations and volunteers after *Dobbs*?

**Lin:** We have never seen such an outpouring of support in Wisconsin and across the country. Also, people are very willing to talk about this issue. All should talk to others about abortion options available.

**Cardin:** How can the League and its members help remove the abortion ban in Wisconsin or provide access for those who need reproductive services?

**Morrison:** It's important that we all educate ourselves about how women of color disparately experience the health care system and share that information with others. Women deserve the freedom to make their own judgments about their bodies and the care that they need. The Foundation is developing a policy blueprint for black women's health called "Black Women Deserve." Working with UW Core to conduct the research and develop policies needed to ensure that policies improve the disparate outcomes of black women, children and families. All are encouraged to support the policy blueprint. We should work together to contact policymakers to carry this out. All are welcome to contribute to the Foundation.

**Safar:** All of us have a sphere of influence and we should use that to share information with those you know. We can't underestimate the power of conversations about this issue. Everyone can agree that we all deserve individual bodily autonomy. Everyone should vote.

**Cardin:** How are Wisconsin voters reacting to this? Like Kansas?

**Safar:** Unfortunately, we don't have direct democracy in Wisconsin and can't do a referendum as they do in Kansas. There is a big increase in voter registration, especially among women. The abortion issue has been used on both sides to organize their base. All had assumed *Roe* would continue. Now that it has ended, we need to put pressure on those who think your bodily autonomy is not as important as mine.

**Cardin:** What is the status of Wisconsin's trigger law and the challenge by the Attorney General to that law?

**Safar:** The law has been on the books since 1849 and it has never been repealed. It is not a trigger law and its legal status is unknown. The Attorney General has said that he will not enforce it and he has asked the court to clarify whether it is enforceable. The suit is pending in the Dane County Circuit Court. There are disagreements as to which court should hear the case. It will be decided in the next few months. The suit is not a solution to the problem but is one tool we have to mitigate the harm.

**Cardin:** How are people responding to the overturn of *Roe*?

**Williamson:** We are able to track where people are going when they leave the state through our relationships with clinics in other states. We don't have information about people who self-manage their abortions. We are in the process of gathering this information but have not completed it.

**Cardin:** A question from the audience: If abortion is not accessible in Wisconsin how much criminal risk is there to people who leave the state to get an abortion or to those who assist them?

**Safar:** Self-managed abortion is not illegal in Wisconsin. The 1849 law imposes criminal law on physicians who perform abortions. People can provide transportation and other assistance without criminal liability. There is possible criminal liability if you obtain abortion medication and give it to someone else.

**Cardin:** A question from the audience: Because of gerrymandering, there is not a likelihood that the legislature will repeal the 1849 law. What legislation could help?

**Lin:** There is a coordinated ground movement trying to freeze the abortion movement by tracking those seeking abortion.

**Cardin:** There is a possibility that a county could hold a referendum on abortion rights as was done with the fair maps movement. Do you foresee that happening?

**Safar:** Anything that can be done to advance the issue should be done. A county referendum would bring attention to the issue even though it would not change the law. The gerrymandering movement did not yet achieve its goals but there are still ways that we could get fair maps, including the state Supreme Court and Congress.

**Morrison:** No great policy change has ever happened without a shift in public attitudes. Along with pushing for policy changes, we need to change the way people think about fairness and black women's needs. The belief that black women don't feel pain has continued for centuries in this country and black women still suffer harm from it. Alice Walker said: "The easiest way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." We all have the power to change we collectively think about matters like abortion. It's not hopeless unless you believe it's hopeless. I have a vision that everyone in Wisconsin has the freedom, access and the right to make the health care decisions that they should be trusted to make.

**Cardin:** For closing remarks, what do you want to see happen? Where do we go from here?

**Williamson:** We need to continue civic engagement and encouraging voting. We should try to do better and not to go back to the way things were. We need to end the stigma of abortion. Most importantly, we need to listen to those most impacted and follow their lead.

**Safar:** The movement to build a better and more inclusive democracy will not be accomplished in a linear way. There will be setbacks. To be in this work for the long haul we need to celebrate our successes, be committed to making small changes and be okay with failing and making mistakes and learn from them so we can do better. We need to use our power and privilege in a way that amplifies the voices of those who don't have that power and privilege.

**Morrison:** Quote by Socrates: "The secret to real change is not by fighting the old but by building the new." In Wisconsin, we need to be laser-focused on building the new. We don't want to go back to the *Roe* world; we want better and we can build better. Quote by Eleanor Roosevelt: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." I believe in the beauty of Wisconsin. I believe in our potential to protect the reproductive freedom of black women and all Wisconsinites. And I believe that we can go from being the worst state in the nation for black infant mortality and among the worst for black maternal health to one of the very best states to raise a black family. At the Foundation we will work to advocate to ensure that social, political and structural change does happen and does ensure the protection of our reproductive freedom.

**Lin:** Abortion funds are part of the community to support people who need abortion access. It is ourselves that we are doing this work for. *Roe* should be the floor, not the ceiling, it provides the foundation for our work going forward.

**Cardin:** Another question for Nicole Safar: what other civil rights are in danger because of the *Dobbs* decision?

**Safar:** When looking at the US Supreme Court we should consider their actions, not their words. Other civil rights were based on the same principles as *Roe*. This Court has been captured by the right and we can't rely on this Court to expand and protect civil

rights. There has been an organized movement to change the Court. We need a grassroots movement to protect the rights we need. We need to consider how we can change the Court: get rid of the filibuster and expand the federal courts. Use our vote to improve the federal court system.

**Cardin:** Thank all of the panelists, Madison College and those who put this program together: Sue Jennik, Program Director; Amanda Hingst, who put the Resource Materials together; Wendy Hathaway, who helped with publicity and Amanda Krueger, who provided technical assistance. The League of Women Voters Discussion Units will be meeting next week. The Book Discussion will discuss “Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood,” by Michelle Goodwin on Thursday evening and Saturday morning. The next forum is “Protect Your Right to Vote: Proposed Election Laws” on October 10, 2022 at 6 p.m. Information about all of these events is available on our website: [lwvdanecounty.org](http://lwvdanecounty.org).