

Head of U.S. Planned Parenthood quits amid dispute over mission

Citing disagreements with board leaders over whether Planned Parenthood should focus on health care or abortion advocacy, the organization's president is stepping down.

Dr. Leana Wen took the reins at Planned Parenthood eight months ago. On Tuesday, she announced that she was resigning.

Wen's statements about her departure suggested internal turbulence within the organization.

She initially posted on Twitter, "I just learned that the @PPFA Board ended my employment at a secret meeting. We were engaged in good faith negotiations about my departure based on philosophical differences over the direction and future of Planned Parenthood."

A few minutes later, she posted an official statement.

"As a physician and public health leader, I came to Planned Parenthood to lead a national health care organization that provides essential primary and preventative care to millions of underserved women and families, and to advocate for a broad range of policies that affect our patients' health," she said.

"I believe that the best way to protect abortion care is to be clear that it is not a political issue but a health care one, and that we can expand support for reproductive rights by finding common ground with the large majority of Americans who understand reproductive health care as the fundamental health care that it is."

Wen said that she is stepping down due to philosophical differences with the new board chairs over the direction that the organization should be moving.

In a memo to Planned Parenthood employees, Wen elaborated on her dispute with board leaders.

She noted that when she was interviewed for the role of president, she asked the search committee whether they viewed the organization primarily as an advocacy organization "with medical services that are necessary to strengthen its impact" or as a health care organization "with advocacy as a necessary vehicle to protect rights and access."

Wen said that she firmly believes Planned Parenthood to be fundamentally about health care, and has spent her eight months as president focusing on patient

care and the promotion of reproductive rights as health care.

"I came to Planned Parenthood to run a national health care organization and to advocate for the broad range of public health policies that affect our patients' health," she said.

But the new board chairs of Planned Parenthood Federation of American and Planned Parenthood Action Fund disagree with that emphasis.

"The new Board leadership has determined that the priority of Planned Parenthood moving forward is to double down on abortion rights advocacy," Wen said.

Planned Parenthood announced on Tuesday that former board member Alexis McGill Johnson has been named acting president, adding that the organization hopes to appoint a new president by the end of 2019.

Wen was appointed head of Planned Parenthood in September 2018, following the 12-year presidency of Cecile Richards.

Wen moved to the United States from China at age eight. Before taking on her role with Planned Parenthood, she worked as an emergency room doctor and as the health commissioner of Baltimore. She was the first physician to lead Planned Parenthood in five decades.

Planned Parenthood is the largest provider of abortions in the United States. In 2016, the organization performed about one out of every three abortions.

In the past decade, Planned Parenthood has seen its number of patients decline. The number of cancer screenings, contraceptives distributed, and prenatal services provided by the organization decreased as well.

Abortions, however, have increased by about 10 percent since 2006, despite Planned Parenthood seeing fewer patients.

The debate about Planned Parenthood's public image as a health care provider or abortion advocacy group comes as cuts in funding and abortion restrictions in dozens of states across the country have put the organization on the defensive.

The appointments of Supreme Court Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh have brought the issue of abortion into the spotlight, amid speculation that the court could overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that mandated legal abortion nationwide.

In addition, a new rule under the Trump administration prevents Title X fund recipients from performing or referring for abortions, and bars abortion clinics from sharing facilities with entities that receive Title X money. Planned Parenthood stands to lose about \$60 million in federal funding as a result of the rule, which was upheld by a federal court of appeals last month.

Planned Parenthood has also faced increased scrutiny following the release of a series of undercover videos in 2015 in which executives at the organization appear to be discussing the transfer of body parts from aborted babies for money, a practice that would violate federal law.