T rust Women South Wind Women’s Center opened Sept. 10 in Oklahoma City. Prior to its opening, Oklahoma City was the largest city in the United States without an abortion provider — in no small part due to the state’s overtly hostile abortion laws and the ostracism and harassment that abortion providers regularly face.

With one OB/GYN for every 18,713 women in Oklahoma, the state struggles with the second-worst reproductive health access in the United States. Not only was abortion care limited to just two communities — Tulsa and Norman — Oklahoma has some of the nation’s highest infant mortality and maternal mortality rates.

“As the numbers indicate, Oklahoma was not being fully served,” said Julie A. Burkhart, Trust Women founder and CEO.

The Oklahoma City clinic marks a meaningful increase in access in Oklahoma by offering gynecological care, contraception, transgender care and abortion services. “You have to have a certain level of tenacity and stubbornness to do this work,” says Julie. “Despite all the challenges, independent abortion care providers are the ones really moving the needle on abortion access in this country right now.”

Julie knows about tenacity in the face of challenges. While independent clinics are closing at an alarming rate — about one in four centers have closed since 2012 — Trust Women has opened two clinics in states hostile to abortion care providers. In 2013, Julie opened Trust Women South Women’s Center in Wichita, Kansas. The clinic was opened in the same building where Dr. George Tiller provided abortion care prior to his assassination in 2009. Though they face regular threats and harassment, Julie and her staff continue to provide compassionate, non-judgmental care.

“Despite all the challenges, independent abortion care providers are the ones really moving the needle on abortion access in this country right now.”

Abortion Care Network supports abortion care providers to ensure they are able to provide excellent care to the individuals, families and communities they serve.
Supporter Julie Sheppard and Julie A. Burkhart share a toast at the Oklahoma City Center open house.

Opening the clinic in Oklahoma City required enormous stubbornness in the face of challenges, as well: it took years to find a building, to find a lender willing to work with an abortion provider and to secure licensing from the Department of Health. In both Oklahoma City and Wichita, staff and patients must navigate protesters, harassment, and laws that impose burdensome forced waiting periods.

Julie recognizes that this movement is larger than any one individual provider, and that truly, we are stronger together: “Independent providers really lean into abortion — it’s not something we minimize — and because we lean into abortion, we have to be able to lean on each other.”

Being a part of a community of other independent abortion care providers (Indies) has been one important way for staff to connect to the larger movement. “It’s been really wonderful to have that connection with other people doing the work,” says Julie, who lists the Abortion Care Network’s annual conference and listservs as meaningful ways of staying informed and involved. These connections are personally valuable to those providing abortion care, as well: over the last few challenging years, colleagues from Indies over the country have sent letters, emails, faxes and made phone calls just to check in and offer support.

We’re honored to work with independent abortion care providers such as Trust Women, which continues to provide compassionate, nonjudgmental care in the face of enormous challenges. Welcome Trust Women to the Abortion Care Network!

**TOP 5 THINGS TO WATCH FOR FOLLOWING THE SUPREME COURT’S DECISION**

**AMANDA ALLEN & STEPHANIE TOTI, CENTER FOR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**

On June 27, 2016, the Supreme Court issued a historic decision in *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt*, striking down a pair of medically unnecessary abortion restrictions that would have devastated abortion access throughout Texas. In doing so, the Court reaffirmed 40 years of precedent holding that access to abortion care is a fundamental right. The court further strengthened legal protections for abortion by making clear that legal restrictions are unconstitutional unless the benefits they confer—as judged by credible evidence—justify the burdens they impose. This decision is a game-changer that will help us to defeat restrictive abortion laws throughout the country. Here are five things to watch for following the Supreme Court’s decision:

1) **Repeal Bills Targeting Unconstitutional Restrictions.** Many abortion restrictions currently on the books cannot satisfy the evidence-based standard articulated by the Supreme Court. Some states have already called for repealing their Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers (TRAP) laws, and we expect many others to introduce repeal legislation next year.

2) **Litigation Targeting Unconstitutional Restrictions.** Where we don’t repeal TRAP laws, we can challenge them in court. Watch for a new wave of litigation to dismantle the infrastructure of unnecessary abortion restrictions that has been limiting access to safe abortion care across the country.

3) **The Women’s Health Protection Act (H.R. 448/S. 217).** Congress and the courts have independent obligations to ensure that the fundamental rights of every person within the U.S. are respected. The Women’s Health Protection Act (WHPA) is a federal bill that would create legislative safeguards and invalidate laws that single out abortion care for medically unnecessary restrictions. Learn more about WHPA and the Act for Women! campaign: actforwomen.org.

4) **Proactive “Whole Woman’s Health Acts” in the states.** Beyond repealing TRAP and other abortion restrictions, encourage your state elected officials to introduce the Whole Woman’s Health Act. This bill codifies the standard set by the Supreme Court in June, and makes unenforceable those restrictions that burden abortion access without a medical benefit. Be on the lookout for an advocacy toolkit later this year!

5) **Pivoting by Anti-Choice Advocates.** In light of our historic victory, we expect anti-choice advocates to pivot toward laws that focus attention on the mechanics of abortion procedures. Watch for an increase in bills to ban D&E, extend mandatory waiting periods, and restrict methods of pregnancy tissue disposal. We must be prepared to meet these new attacks head on and demonstrate why these laws are part of the same sham as the clinic shutdown laws in the *Whole Woman’s Health* case.
7 CLINICS, 11 DAYS: AN ABORTION CARE ROAD TRIP

NIKKI MADSEN, ACN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The car was packed and the cooler was filled with snacks and beverages. As we backed out of our driveway in Minneapolis, my 4-year old had his road trip bingo in hand while my husband was queuing up his road trip playlist. Our family was setting off on our first official summer road trip. Like many American families, we hit the road to explore the U.S. by car – with one twist. We’d be visiting Abortion Care Network member clinics along the way.

On day one we traveled almost 400 miles through fields dotted with wind turbines on our way to Bellevue, Nebraska where Dr. Carhart, one of the four abortion providers highlighted in After Tiller, provides abortion care at his abortion clinics, AbortionClinics.org.

Since Dr. George Tiller’s assassination, there are few doctors across the country willing to help people access later-term care. Independent abortion care provider Dr. Carhart is one of them. After visiting with friends and the must-see zoo in Omaha, we were back on the road; five hours later, we arrived at Trust Women South Wind Women’s Center in Wichita, Kansas.

As you enter the clinic, quotes and a picture of Dr. Tiller greet you. Julie Burkhart, a colleague of Dr. Tiller’s, brought abortion care back to Wichita in 2013 by opening this clinic despite regular threats. In fact, at no other clinic during our trip was the presence of anti-choice extremism so intense. Immediately after our visit with the South Wind staff, we jumped back into the car and drove another 2.5 hours to Oklahoma City for a tour of Julie’s newest facility (see cover article).

This was our longest day of traveling with a young child, and I couldn’t help but think of all the women who are forced to trek long distances with their children to access legal medical care, only to have to repeat the trip after 24, 48 or 72 hours due to forced delay laws. I met one of these

Continued on page 4...

Start = Minneapolis, MN
A = Dr. Carhart’s clinic, AbortionClinics.org, Bellevue, NE
B = Trust Women South Wind Women’s Center, Wichita, KS
C = Trust Women, Oklahoma City, OK
D = Little Rock Family Planning Clinic, Little Rock, AK
E = CHOICES: Memphis Center for Reproductive Health, Memphis, TN
F = Alabama Women’s Center
End = West Alabama Women’s Center
women and her 6 year-old daughter – who’d traveled almost 7 hours from Mississippi just to have to turn around and do it again in 48 hours – at our next stop: Little Rock Family Planning in Little Rock, Arkansas.

As you drive through the gate, a sign greets you: “What do you call a woman who has had an abortion? Mother, Sister, Daughter, Wife.” As the only provider of surgical abortion in Arkansas and the only provider of care beyond 16 weeks in the region, Little Rock Family Planning Clinic is essential to abortion access in the South. The beautiful clinic and the compassionate, committed staff make this clinic a place we would be proud to bring a sister, daughter or friend.

Though the terrain changed as we traveled further south, the distance between clinics continued to feel massive.

At the end of our first week, we drove 146 miles from Little Rock to Memphis, Tennessee to visit CHOICES: Memphis Center for Reproductive Health. CHOICES is one of approximately 15 remaining nonprofit independent abortion care clinics in the country; many of these nonprofit centers offer full-spectrum reproductive health services and fill other health care gaps for marginalized communities.

We spent the weekend in Memphis enjoying Moonpies, listening to music and touring recording studios. That Monday, we woke up early to await the historic Whole Woman’s Health v. 

Hellerstedt decision. Let’s just say there was a lot of screaming and jumping on the bed that morning at the Fairfield Inn!

“Though the terrain has changed as we traveled further south, the distance between clinics continued to feel massive.

That afternoon, we headed 215 miles southeast to Alabama, where we would celebrate the Supreme Court victory with the staff of Alabama Women’s Clinic in Huntsville, and the following day, West Alabama Women’s Center in Tuscaloosa. These clinics brought public awareness to the harmful targeted regulation of abortion provider (TRAP) laws – like the Texas laws declared unconstitutional earlier that morning – in the PBS acclaimed documentary TRAPPED.

After sharing a meal with the staff of West Alabama Women’s Center, we finished the clinic visit portion of our road trip by sharing ice cream with Dr. Willie Parker, who chatted with us about the tragic loss of Prince and offered advice on what to see and do in Alabama, where we would spend the 4th of July.

Over the course of our 2,000 mile journey from Minneapolis to Tuscaloosa, we were reminded that independent abortion care providers play a fundamental role in making abortion care accessible. Though they face tremendous adversity, ACN clinic members continue to provide exceptional and dignified abortion care – even when extremely isolated and working in the country’s most hostile states.

The emotional and professional support and programming offered by Abortion Care Network is vital to our members and the patients they serve, and I’m honored to work on their behalf each and every day.
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ver the past year, the Abortion Care Network (ACN) has worked hard to assess the obstacles faced by independent abortion care providers and determine how we can best support clinic sustainability and protect abortion access. Through in-person interviews, over 30 clinic visits, and survey research, providers told us that what they need most from ACN – beyond our current programming – is communications, marketing and professional development programming. In order to meet these needs, we developed and secured funding for a new program called Uniting Our Voices: Communications and Media Support for Independent Abortion Care Providers.

Uniting Our Voices provides media and messaging training in small-group cohorts where participants will learn from each other, build meaningful relationships, and receive continued learning opportunities. Through spokesperson development and pursuing media and coordinated communications opportunities, Uniting Our Voices will elevate the unique perspectives of independent providers at the local, state and national levels, and bring our progressive vision to public and policy discussions on abortion care.

This September, Uniting Our Voices kicked off as the first cohort met for a two-day training in Minneapolis. The group included ACN staff, clinic management and frontline staff from Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Tennessee and Washington.

In addition to the opportunity to build relationships and learn from each other, the training facilitated sessions on storytelling, how to effectively communicate your message, and opportunities to practice interview skills.

“I was flabbergasted by how much each of us learned and improved over the course of the two-day training,” said Kim Chiz, RN, Executive Director of the Allentown Women’s Center in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. “Even those with no previous communications experience, like front office staff and medical assistants, can benefit from this training, so that they can represent the nearly voiceless folks working so darn hard on our front lines.”

Every day, independent abortion care providers offer dignified, compassionate care to patients throughout the United States. Through the Uniting Our Voices program, our members will be better equipped to help the public understand the existence of, need for, and unique challenges faced by independent abortion care providers. Kim articulated this outcome perfectly: “I now know how to practice and prepare so that I can be a more effective spokesperson for myself, our clinic, and the Abortion Care Network.”

PHOTO CREDITS: All images by Candace Streeter

Our first cohort (left to right): Jennifer Thibodeau, Danielle Driver, Katy Leopard, Mercedes Sanchez, Eileen Diamond, Angel Rucker, Andrea Ferrigno, Kim Chiz, Nikki Madsen, Kelly Flynn

THANKS TO SUPPORTERS LIKE YOU, ACN WILL PROVIDE IN-DEPTH TRAINING TO 30 OF OUR MEMBERS THIS YEAR, AS WELL AS COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT TO OUR ENTIRE MEMBERSHIP IN ORDER TO AMPLIFY THE UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES OF INDEPENDENT ABORTION CARE PROVIDERS AND THE PATIENTS THEY SERVE.
Give to the Max is a 24-hour giving extravaganza where donors come together to support the nonprofits that inspire them. We hope ACN is one of your nonprofits this year! You can donate on November 17, 2016 or schedule your donation as early as November 1, 2016. Visit http://bit.ly/ACNtotheMax to donate or go to giveMN.org and search for Abortion Care Network.

We have a $5,000 matching grant! That means your tax-deductible gift to ACN will be matched dollar-for-dollar up to $5,000 between now and Nov 17th.