

Louisiana antiabortion groups seek to ‘change heart and minds’ even amid wave of strict laws

Antiabortion activists have trained advocates to frame their cause as supporting women. And they’ve helped push state legislatures to pass hundreds of restrictive measures in hope of *Roe*’s repeal.

by [Jessica Mendoza](#) in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) Most Saturdays, first-year college student Taylor Gautreaux gets up at 6 a.m. and goes to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to join a group that gathers just outside the property lines of Delta Clinic, one of the last three abortion clinics in the state.

She dresses neutrally—no slogans or religious symbols—and keeps her voice low, avoiding words such as *God* or *hell*. She tells the women—and their partners or mothers, whomever they’re with—that she understands they’re in a difficult spot. Do they know there are resources to help them so they don’t have to kill their child? There’s a center with those resources right next door.

“We don’t want to scrutinize a woman,” she says. “We don’t talk bad about the abortionist. We recognize their humanity, just as much as we recognize the humanity of the unborn.”

Gautreaux, a devout Catholic, is the type of young activist who has helped take the antiabortion movement to the brink of achieving its long-term goal of overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion in the United States. For years groups like Louisiana Right to Life, where Gautreaux volunteers, have trained advocates to frame their cause as a human rights campaign.

Over the past two decades, antiabortion activists have helped push state legislatures to pass hundreds of measures restricting the procedure in anticipation

of a Supreme Court case that could lead to *Roe*'s repeal. In May, Louisiana lawmakers passed a bill that would make abortion illegal after six weeks of pregnancy.

[Several states, including Alabama, Georgia, and Ohio, enacted restrictive abortion laws in recent months. Baptist News Global reported that Alabama governor Kay Ivey, a Southern Baptist, spoke in religious terms as she signed the nation's most restrictive abortion law, which makes "performing an abortion a felony punishable by up to 99 years in prison except in the rarest of circumstances. There is no exception for rape or incest."]

The Alabama law is so strict it has little chance of being upheld in court. At the same time, states such as New York and Virginia are passing measures to protect abortion rights in case *Roe* is overturned.

In Louisiana, a brand of socially conscious religious conservatism aligns many Democrats and Republicans against abortion. The state mandates counseling for women seeking an abortion, a 24-hour waiting period between counseling and when the abortion is performed, and physician-licensing requirements for anyone who performs the procedure. In April, the legislature passed the Love Life Amendment, which, if approved by voters via ballot in the fall, would change the state constitution to say there is no right to an abortion and taxpayer dollars cannot be used to fund the procedure.

"Our goal is twofold: to make abortion illegal and to make it unthinkable," says Alex Seghers, education director for Louisiana Right to Life. "Louisiana looks very successful compared to the rest of the country."

Seghers sends students such as Gautreaux to training sessions for teenagers interested in learning about abortion and other issues, such as euthanasia. These efforts forgo giant crucifixes and gruesome photos in favor of arguments based, for example, on the idea that abortion is linked to depression, post-traumatic stress, and infertility as well as increased risk of breast cancer—all claims that the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists has flatly refuted.

Advocates are encouraged to support women at whatever stage of their decision.

"You can change the law all you want," Gautreaux said. "But until we change people's hearts and minds . . . we're not going to see an end to abortion in the

United States.”

Another Louisiana college student, Kameron Kane, also spends a lot of her time outside an abortion clinic. She is a clinic escort in New Orleans, there to make sure the women can get inside safely, with as little harassment from protesters as possible.

Although groups like Louisiana Right to Life have embraced a less confrontational approach to their advocacy, plenty of others still prefer the old aggressive tactics.

“As the women enter the clinic, these people like to shout things . . . ‘Why are you killing me, Mommy?’” Kane said. She heard about being a clinic escort from New Orleans Abortion Fund, a local nonprofit that raises money for women who can’t afford an abortion. Kane also canvasses on city sidewalks, handing out information on economic justice and abortion access.

Groups such as NOAF also testify against antiabortion measures. The state solicitor general is right now defending 30 abortion laws and hundreds of lawsuits in court. Six more have been introduced in the current legislative session, which started in April. Even Planned Parenthood, with its broad network, struggles; the organization is currently tangling with the state Department of Health over a permit to perform abortions in Louisiana.

“None of the organizations working on this issue here in Louisiana have much capacity,” said Amy Irvin, who co-founded NOAF in 2012. “It’s a loosely knit group trying to do a lot.”

Activists on both sides are looking ahead to the day when a case that could lead to *Roe*’s repeal lands in the Supreme Court. But they recognize that won’t be the end—far from it.

“I feel proud that we’re still at this,” Irvin said. “I don’t know if anyone thought we would still be around.”

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