

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now State Rep. Ruth Richardson to lead Planned Parenthood
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CATHY WURZER: Well there's more news today related to abortion access. Yesterday, DFL House member Ruth Richardson made news in becoming the new CEO of Planned Parenthood North Central States. The organization operates 28 health centers in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa. Richardson takes the helm at a tumultuous time for the organization, with abortion rights rolled back in North and South Dakota, and at risk in other states following the fall of *Roe v. Wade* in June.

Richardson, who's been in the state house since 2018, remains on the ballot for re-election in November. Which raises some interesting questions. She's on the line right now. Welcome to the program, Representative.

RUTH Hi. Thanks for having me.

RICHARDSON:

CATHY You are the first Black CEO to lead Planned Parenthood in the region. We were just talking about a new article
WURZER: from the U of M calling abortion access a racial justice issue. Do you view your work in that way?

RUTH Definitely. Reproductive justice and just the human right to healthcare is something that was really instilled in me
RICHARDSON: as a child. Hearing the birthing stories of my mom and her sisters growing up in segregated Mississippi and hearing the stories of my grandmother and others, it really sparked in me the reality that there's been a lot of historical mistreatment. And healthcare truly is a human right, and everyone should have an equal opportunity to achieve their optimal health and access healthcare.

CATHY I mentioned in the intro that it is a tumultuous time for abortion rights. What's the top item in your priority list for
WURZER: this new role?

RUTH Well with this new role, I'm planning to start with listening. There's a lot going on with overturning of *Roe v.*
RICHARDSON: *Wade*. We know that in [AUDIO OUT], abortion has been banned in 15 states. And there's concerns that that could be as high as 26 states. And so really, to get started within this role, I'm going to be focusing on talking with patients, talking [AUDIO OUT], and talking with stakeholders.

But the most important thing is recognizing that the work that Planned Parenthood does through its health centers is vital. It's critical. They're a leader in reproductive healthcare, and their work changes lives. And it's really about ensuring that everyone has the ability to control their bodies and their future.

CATHY This is a high profile job. Do you plan to resign your house seat or abandon your re-election campaign?
WURZER:

RUTH Well, I'm on the ballot, and I expect to serve. Clearly there's an election that needs to happen within November
RICHARDSON: that everyone is going to be watching very closely. And me being a CEO of a nonprofit healthcare center is something that I'm doing right now. Right now, I am CEO of a multi-site nonprofit healthcare center that's open 24/7. And with the high acuity of substance use disorders and mental health, I've been doing that role while serving within the legislature as well.

CATHY Yes, that's true. And you are CEO of a much smaller organization. Planned Parenthood is much larger, and of
WURZER: course, they are politically powerful. I'm wondering, I can't think of a lawmaker who has stayed in the house or senate and runs such a powerful organization. How is that not a conflict of interest for you?

RUTH Well, I think it's important to remember that by design, Minnesota has a citizen's legislature. It's not an accident.
RICHARDSON: It's the way that the system was designed. And there's this ongoing debate about whether we need to build a new system that isn't a citizen's legislature, that would be a full-time legislature. But for the current moment we have and for what we are faced with right now, there are many folks that are within the legislature who have other jobs.

We have business owners, we have educators, we have farmers. Insurance professionals, real estate professionals. I know there are bills that were introduced last session about changing the current system that we have. But with the current system that we have, we anticipate and expect that people will have jobs while serving within the legislature.

CATHY That is true. And lawmakers do have outside jobs, but your Republican colleagues are already saying this is an egregious conflict of interest. What do you say to them?
WURZER:

RUTH Well, I think the most important thing is that there is a standard that is set up in the House around conflicts of
RICHARDSON: interest. And also around recusal from votes. And for those who have been paying attention with my current role within the healthcare realm, there has been an instant where I had to recuse myself from a vote. I followed the procedure of the House. I informed the speaker. And my recusal is on record.

And so I think the important piece to remember is that within the citizen legislature, people are going to have employment. And if there is a will to move our legislature in a different way with a new system design, then that will be the future. But for now, we have the citizen's legislature.

CATHY Yeah, and because there are strict rules prohibiting lawmakers from being paid lobbyists, I'm wondering, will
WURZER: there be some kind of firewall between you and Planned Parenthood's lobbying?

RUTH So I'm going to be overtaking the CEO role of the nonprofit healthcare center, the 501(c)(3). The political arm of
RICHARDSON: the organization is a completely separate entity. It's a separate legal entity. And Sarah Stoesz will remain the president and CEO of the political arm overseeing that entity. So there is a firewall already between the nonprofit healthcare side and the political side. And that will continue.

CATHY All right. Ruth Richardson, thank you so much.
WURZER:

RUTH Thank you.
RICHARDSON:

CATHY Ruth Richardson is the new CEO of Planned Parenthood North Central States. She's also a state lawmaker.
WURZER: