**UU Faith Action NJ - Annual Meeting Report - June 12, 2021**

**Reproductive Justice Task Force**

As we all know, the past year or so was extremely challenging due to the quarantine and other restrictions emanating from Covid - 19. It meant that we could not meet with our coalition partners in person or schedule another event such as the one we had in 2018 ( Know Her Truths: Life Behind Bars for Women In NJ) at the Monmouth Congregation. On the other hand, there was a lot of opportunity for Zoom meetings with coalition partners. Work went on.

Our overriding goal was to intentionally place the reproductive freedoms of marginalized groups at the center of our agenda. As we all know, “[SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SisterSong_Women_of_Color_Reproductive_Justice_Collective)”, was the first organization founded to build a reproductive justice movement. In 1997, 16 women-of-color-led organizations representing four communities of color – Native American, Latin American, African American, and Asian American – launched the nonprofit to build a national reproductive justice movement. Our task force is very aware of our role as allies in this movement. Generally, the task force has been able to do this because Thrive NJ, a somewhat diverse coalition for reproductive rights has a good understanding of reproductive justice. Our other community partner, NJ Prison Justice Watch Monitoring Group, advocates for women in prison, most of whom are people in marginalized groups.

This year there has been a major focus on the Reproductive Freedom Act (S3030/A4848) which safeguards reproductive care, upholds basic rights and justice, and respects decision-making throughout pregnancy for all women regardless of race, class, sexuality, ability, or citizenship status. The bill expands the protections of reproductive justice beyond the right to abortion to include protections and expanded access to birth control and pregnancy-related care, as well as eliminating medically unnecessary restrictions that block access to care. It basically enshrines Roe v. Wade and the other issues into law.

The bills have been introduced in both houses but have not been posted to be heard in either the Assembly or Senate committees. It appears that the legislature will hold a vote during the lame-duck session. In the meantime, the Reproductive Justice members are attending abortion access meetings and other subcommittees, trying to balance keeping the issue alive with the knowledge that nothing will happen until the lame-duck session.

 Another goal is to strengthen maternal health and reduce maternal mortality, including supporting the Maternal Mortality Review Commission and affirm our commitment to ending New Jersey’s shameful record as a state with one of the worst Black-White racial disparities in maternal deaths in the nation. We are monitoring this issue through Thrive NJ and the Maternal Justice Subcommittee. Bills being followed: Home Births Bill **A4011** Requires health insurance carriers to provide coverage for home births**; A-1073 -** Requires pre-eclampsia testing for certain pregnant women; **A-1077 -** Requires DOH to develop a plan to improve access to perinatal mood and anxiety disorder screening. **A-3633** - establishes requirements concerning the provision of postpartum care information and the development of individualized postpartum care plans.

We also support the strategic plan of the Sexual Education Subcommittee of Thrive NJ, which challenges heterosexist and cissexist assumptions about sexuality and gender. The subcommittee is working on a bill to submit to the legislature that addresses the issues above. Currently, there has not been a bill introduced.

Working with the Criminal Justice Task Force, we monitored the situation at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, the only women’s prison in the state. This facility houses women who are disproportionately Black and Brown, women with disadvantaged backgrounds, and transgender women. We had expected to focus on the work of the Commission to Study Sexual Assault, Misconduct and Harassment by Staff against Inmates in NJ State Correctional Facilities which was to be set up as part of the Dignity Act, however, the commission only recently had all of its members appointed. In the meantime, the Department of Justice investigated and wrote a scathing report about EMCF which was followed by hearings. On January 11, 2021, 3 women were forcibly removed from their cells, beaten, and physically assaulted. When this became known, several guards were charged with the crimes. More hearings occurred. This past week another turn occurred. The Governor received an investigative report from a former comptroller and announced that he plans to close Edna Mahan. Two days later, Commissioner Marcus Hicks resigned from his post at the Department of Corrections. It is clear that changes will occur but the process of closing the prison will be a long one. The task force plans to monitor these changes and advocate for compassionate and humane treatment of the prisoners as well as a plan for the future that will reform the culture that the women have been living in.

We also had planned to monitor the implementation of the address confidentiality law ( PL2019.c175) There has been no action, most likely due to Covid.