

Profile

Leana Wen: President of Planned Parenthood



After Leana Wen's family immigrated to the USA when she was 8 years old, her mother went to a Planned Parenthood clinic in California. Wen and her sister were also patients there. In November, 2018, Wen became President of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, an organisation that cared for 2.4 million people last year at more than 600 health centres across the USA. Wen is only the second physician to lead Planned Parenthood since it was founded in 1916. At Planned Parenthood clinics, patients can receive services, including birth control, vaccinations, cancer screenings, testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, transgender health services, and safe abortions. The group's advocacy arm organises voter registration drives, protest rallies, mass call-ins to members of Congress, and other activities. One goal is to defeat congressional attempts backed by the White House to prevent low-income patients with Medicaid health insurance from accessing its health-care services. In 2019, one or more of 15 lawsuits involving state restrictions on abortion will come before the Supreme Court, where US President Donald Trump's appointees are likely to provide the votes needed to erode—if not overturn—the landmark *Roe v Wade* decision, which legalised abortion in the USA in 1973.

Wen's journey from Planned Parenthood patient to President began in Shanghai, China, where she was born. As a child Wen suffered from asthma attacks that sent her to the hospital where she was treated by "Dr Sam", she recalled in a TEDMED talk. "I wanted to be just like Dr Sam", she said. Wen accomplished her childhood dream to become a doctor with lightning speed. She earned an undergraduate degree in biochemistry from California State University, Los Angeles at age 18 years. She graduated from the Washington University School of Medicine in St Louis at age 24 years. She went on to complete her residency training at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and was a clinical fellow at Harvard Medical School. As a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford, in the UK, she earned masters of science degrees in public health and policy.

Throughout her career, her patients have been her "North Star", keeping her on course, Wen told *The Lancet*. In 2013, Wen became Director of Patient-Centered Care Research in the Department of Emergency Medicine at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Washington, DC, where she was also a faculty member. "Working in the emergency department, I saw patients coming in who were sick because of illness, but that wasn't the only thing making them ill", she said. "I remember seeing this woman who came in with paralysis, facial droop, and who couldn't walk. She had a stroke and yes, the reason she was there that day was because of a stroke, but what

made her sick was the fact that she was cutting her blood pressure pills in half, and then she was rationing her insulin. Because she didn't have health insurance, that's the reason why she had a stroke. As her physician, of course I need to treat her disease and I need to provide access to health care", Wen continued. "But I wouldn't be the best advocate I could be for her and for my other patients unless I also did the other part which is fighting to protect access to that care."

In 2015, she became Health Commissioner for the US city of Baltimore. That job has more than prepared her to head Planned Parenthood, said the city's Mayor and Wen's previous boss, Catherine Pugh. Wen has been "a very effective advocate and a very effective leader", said Pugh. Wen sought to control the mounting death toll from Baltimore's opioid crisis. She helped persuade the Maryland state legislature to pass a law allowing her to write a standing blanket prescription for naloxone for the city's nearly 620 000 residents. In 3 years, the effort saved almost 3000 lives, she said. In 2016, Wen launched Vision for Baltimore, collaborating with Johns Hopkins University, an optometry non-profit, and a leading eyeglass maker. The initiative has provided eye examinations for nearly 43 000 school students and free prescription glasses for more than 5000. And when the Trump administration cut the Baltimore City Health Department's \$5 million teen pregnancy prevention grant, the city sued the federal government in March, 2018, and won, restoring services to 20 000 young people. "I think she is a person who is a visionary, who can understand problems and conceptualise solutions", said Pugh.

Joshua Sharfstein, Wen's predecessor at the Baltimore City Health Department, served on the committee that recommended her as Health Commissioner and said Planned Parenthood officials made the right choice. "She brings an awful lot of skills for this very difficult job at an incredibly important time", said Sharfstein, now Vice Dean for Public Health Practice and Community Engagement at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore. "She has a lot of tools in her toolbox. She has the clinician, the ER physician. She has thought a lot about quality medical care, communication between doctors and patients, and she wrote a book [*When Doctors Don't Listen*] about that."

Planned Parenthood's mission reflects Wen's long-held priorities, "providing care and fighting to protect access to care", she said. "If there is one thing that I can accomplish as the President of Planned Parenthood, it's to make clear that reproductive health care is standard health care, that women's health care is standard health care and that we must view all aspects of health care as a fundamental human right."

Susan Jaffe



Planned Parenthood Federation of America