

# NOW steps up fight for 'reproductive rights'

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STAFF WRITER

**T**HE National Organization for Women is fighting for equal rights in the workplace. But when it comes to reproduction, they'll settle for nothing less than exclusive rights.

With the loss of federal funding 10 years ago for most abortions, and 39 states establishing similar restrictions, local NOW members believe what they call women's "reproductive rights" have diminished and are further threatened.

The coming year will bring renewed efforts by the Santa Cruz County chapter to hold on to California's MediCare coverage for abortions and to oppose other restrictive legislation that might be introduced.

"We have to fight every year to have MediCal-funded abortions," said Cynthia Mathews, public affairs director of Santa Cruz Planned Parenthood and NOW member. "It's a battle every year."

Mathews and women's rights activist Kate Chen, of Aptos, were speakers Thursday night at the NOW monthly meeting held in Soquel. They discussed the history, status and future of reproductive rights. It was part of a kick-off of a campaign that will include information tables set up today from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in front of Nob Hill market in Watsonville, in Capitola Village and at Capitola Mall. Information tables will also be set up on the Pacific Garden Mall Jan. 16 to 20.

On Jan. 20, the Reproduc-

tive Rights Network of Santa Cruz County — of which Santa Cruz County NOW and Planned Parenthood are both members — will sponsor an evening of speakers, dancing and entertainment titled "Reproductive Rights Celebration and Benefit, Read Our Lips: Keep Abortion Safe and Legal!" at Veteran's Hall, 842 Front St., Santa Cruz.

Speakers will include Santa Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt; Dr. Ira Lubell, health officer of Santa Cruz County; Christina Beltran, student activist; Liz Taylor-Spelling, local NOW president; and Fred Keely, county supervisor and former aide to Assemblyman Sam Farr.

The celebration will be held just two days before the Jan. 22 anniversary of the landmark Roe vs. Wade decision by the Supreme Court in 1973 that legalized abortion.

Some pro-choice activists fear that decision could be weakened or undermined because the Reagan administration filed a brief with the Supreme Court two days after the November election instructing the court to "re-examine" Roe vs. Wade.

"That was a blatant attack on women's reproductive rights, but I don't think Roe vs. Wade will be reversed," Chen said. "That would be a disaster."

Even if the decision stays as is, Mathews and Chen say poor women across the country still don't have access to affordable abortions.

"There's a genuine concern where there is no public funding," Mathews said. She said women have taken drastic

and life-threatening measures to get abortions, sometimes from cut-rate and unqualified operators.

"We know how critical public funding is," Mathews said.

Another critical issue, she said, is the impact of even proposed restrictions on abortion. Such proposals — whether they are ever implemented — often spur women to seek underground services or attempt self-induced abortions.

"That's always a problem, even when these restrictions are even proposed," Mathews said. "We have to deal with that."

California passed legislation last year that would require parental consent or judicial bypass for a minor to get an abortion. An injunction is currently in effect, so the law cannot be enforced. But news of the legislation, Mathews said, spurred at least one young woman she knows of to attempt a self-induced abortion that resulted in sterility.

Although she believes public opinion solidly supports sexual-health services such as those offered by Planned Parenthood, Mathews said "There is always a vocal minority that opposes sex education, birth control for teens and abortion services for anyone."

But sex education, teen birth control and abortion continues. In 1984, 1,046 MediCal abortions were performed in Santa Cruz County. Of that number, 281 were teenagers.

"And that doesn't reflect private-paying clients,"



Kurt Ellison

Cynthia Mathews, left, and Kate Chen and other local groups for continued funding for abortions.

Mathews said.

In 1986, 19,320 patients sought family planning (including contraceptives and abortion services) from the three local public-funded health agencies: Planned Parenthood, Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency and Salud Para La Gente in Watsonville. Planned Parenthood serves some 8,000 clients a year.

Mathews said Planned Parenthood, like any reputable clinic, offers clients the full range of pregnancy options. It doesn't promote abortion, she said. She added that Planned

Parenthood is regularly reviewed by national Planned Parenthood, and by state and federal agencies.

"The anti-abortion clinics aren't reviewed by anyone," she said. "We let clients make their own decision. We offer information and options. I think the same cannot be said about the negative-abortion agencies."

Information and options — especially about pregnancy — are what NOW workers want to preserve and protect.

Chen said NOW members are waiting to see if the Bush administration is as "radi-

cally conservative" in its approach to women's reproductive rights as the presidential campaign suggested. In any case, Chen and Mathews said NOW members will continue to work toward the goal of every woman having access to abortion and minors having confidentiality ensured when they seek contraceptives or abortions.

"I see variations (of the fight for reproductive rights) on the horizon for a long time," Mathews said.

"We must keep active and moving on a grass-roots level," Chen added. "We just have to be vigilant."