

# Women With A Vision

## Our Existence is Political: 30 Years of Black Feminist Struggle



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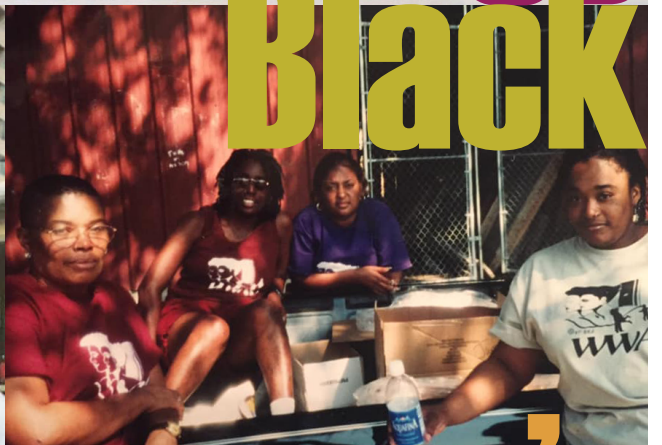
# FOR



Danita Muse, and Catherine Deon Haywood are women with a vision

SAFE SEX ED

# YEARS of Black



# women's leadership

## CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF BLACK WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Women With A Vision (WWAV) works to improve the lives of marginalized women, their families, and communities by addressing the social conditions that hinder their health and well-being. We accomplish this through relentless advocacy, health education, supportive services, and community-based participatory research.

WWAV was founded in 1989 by a collective of Black women born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. Two decades into the “war on drugs,” Black women were increasingly being demonized and criminalized as users and mothers in the context of the crack epidemic, and as “welfare queens” to justify increasing restrictions and gutting the social safety net. At the same time, rates of new HIV infection were peaking, and the numbers of new infections among Black people exceeded those among white people - and have continued to do so ever since. By the early 1990s, HIV/AIDS was the second leading cause of death for Black women between the ages of 25 and 44.

WWAV's foremothers shared an intimate knowledge of how the twin epidemics of HIV and mass incarceration were decimating their communities. They also saw how funding and supportive services were systematically being denied to their people. And so, from their health and human service positions citywide, **our foremothers did what Black women always do: they set their hands to building what their community needed.**

As the story goes, the catalyst that set WWAV's all-volunteer street-based outreach program in motion was the moment when two of our foremothers, Danita Muse and Catherine Haywood, locked eyes across a crowded New Orleans Health Department conference room. Maps of the city had been inked with proposed routes for a new condom distribution blitz. None of the majority Black neighborhoods in the city – and none of the city's housing projects – were to be targeted. That day, Danita and Catherine walked out with boxes of condoms and the zip codes to their Uptown neighborhoods and the Calliope Projects that snaked along Earhart Boulevard. And they got to work. Together with other founding foremothers, they spent days on their front porches packing harm reduction packets, and nights walking the streets to deliver them. Our first home was a closet in Danita's house.



During these first years of work, WWAV built a network of what we call “gatekeepers” – people who ran shooting galleries or crack houses – who could disseminate vital health information and supplies to those who we did not reach directly through our street-based outreach. Gradually, WWAV’s presence in and with community gave us a rare understanding of precisely how systemic poverty and targeted criminalization were driving Black women’s vulnerability to HIV and other health issues. We have leveraged this intimate knowledge of structural injustice and the social determinants of health disparities to create a unique model of community outreach that continues to guide our community engagement, advocacy, and research.

In 1991, WWAV incorporated as a 501(c)(3), and we opened our first office a couple of years later. Just like our unique outreach strategy, our choice of location – and our choice to move – was always shaped by where people were already going, and where people could feel comfortable. Between 1993 and 2005, we maintained offices on Cleveland Street, LaSalle Street, Tulane Avenue, and Washington Avenue.



During Hurricane Katrina in 2005 our organizational leadership was displaced and most of our founding paperwork and supplies were lost in the floodwaters. In the wake of the devastation caused by government abandonment of our communities and mismanagement of the disaster, our foremothers made their ways back to New Orleans. They found a renewed purpose for the organization amid the ethnic cleansing and widespread gentrification of New Orleans that followed, accompanied by increased criminalization of New Orleans’ Black residents, including Black women. In 2006, we decided to hire our first full-time Executive Director to meet these challenges for our community.

Deon Haywood, daughter of our foremother Catherine Haywood, has led Women With A Vision over the past 13 years. Over this time, Deon has overseen the expansion of our work from a dedicated street-based outreach project to the nationally and internationally recognized organizing and advocacy leaders we are today, always relying on the same **principles that have guided us since WWAV’s founding: go to the people, build in concert with them, and fight to realize the world that they need.**



Today, Women With A Vision, Inc. is New Orleans’ only queer, Black-women-led organization organizing at the grassroots and engaging in policy advocacy at the intersections of gender, racial, and reproductive justice. We are widely regarded as the leading national voice on criminalization of Black women and girls in the Deep South, and as national and international leaders in movements for human rights, sex workers’ rights, reproductive justice, and ending mass incarceration. The majority of the foremothers who helped to birth our work 30 years ago have carried the WWAV vision on to other cities and states. Here in New Orleans, Catherine Haywood remains our trusted advisor and partner for all things public health, and Danita Muse now serves on our Board of Directors. We are deeply grateful for their ongoing leadership and tenacity.

# 30 YEARS OF IMPACT





# Our Theory of Change:

## “My Existence is Political”

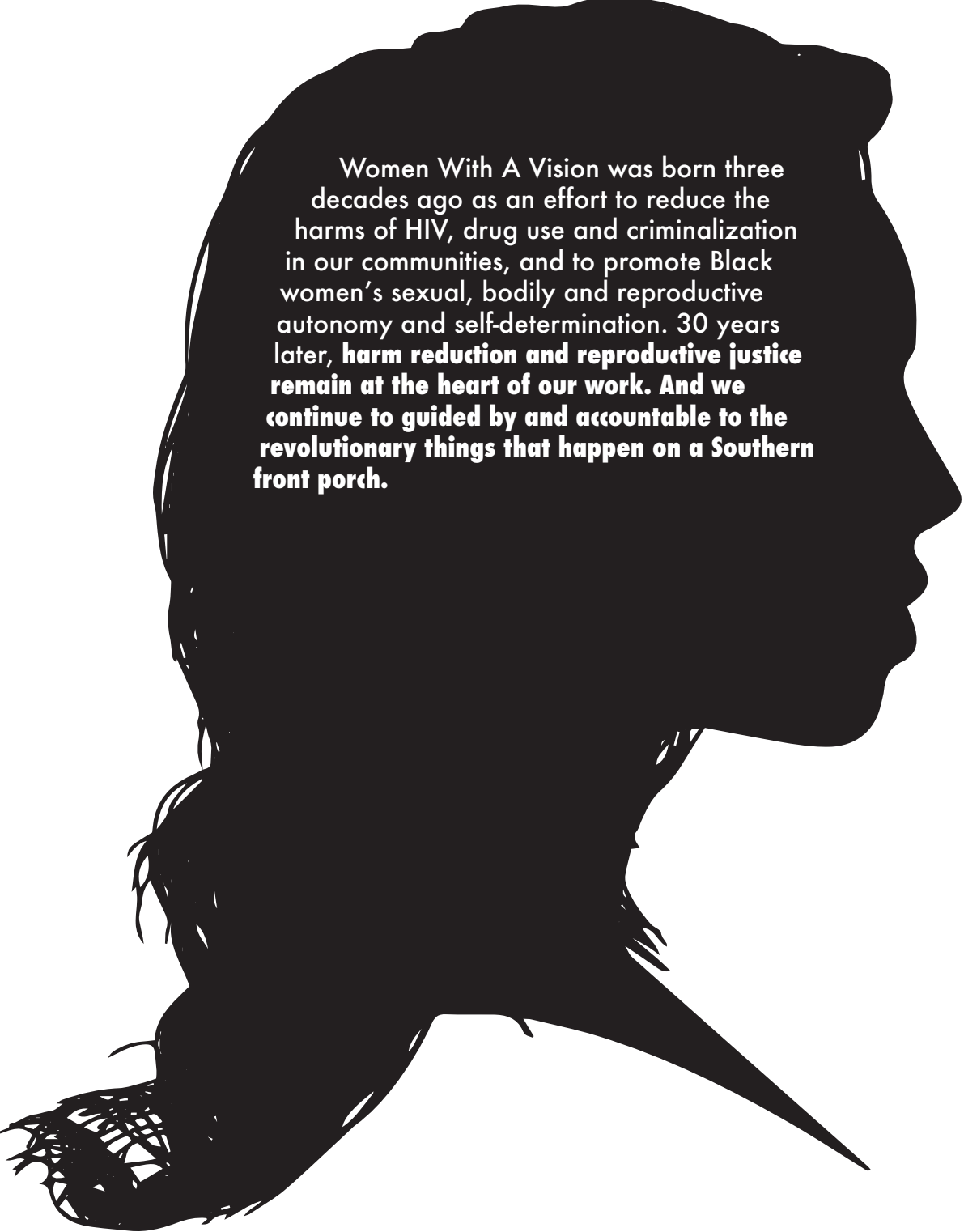
WWAV’s grassroots approach to social change is deeply rooted in Black feminist practice, guided by the simple core principle that Black women’s existence in the face of multiple and intersecting oppressions is political.

This means that **women and girls hold their truths — and their solutions — in their stories.** Speaking these *truths* has enabled us to communicate our work to our allies nationwide and to frame our own *solutions* to the problems our communities face with tools passed down through generations of southern Black women organizers, in whose legacies we stand.

Our work is shaped by these liberation herstories of the Deep South, and by our connections to each other. Our foremother Catherine Haywood always says, **“You have to build a relationship.”** That generations-honed principle of community engagement is our lifeline for knowing and speaking our community’s truths and solutions—whether we are walking the streets of our city doing outreach, meeting with stakeholders to build new possibilities for our future, taking these visions to policy makers who have the power to give our communities what they need, or leading national and international conversations that put the South and our people first as we craft new visions for change.

30 YEARS OF IMPACT

# Our Frameworks:



Women With A Vision was born three decades ago as an effort to reduce the harms of HIV, drug use and criminalization in our communities, and to promote Black women's sexual, bodily and reproductive autonomy and self-determination. 30 years later, **harm reduction and reproductive justice remain at the heart of our work. And we continue to be guided by and accountable to the revolutionary things that happen on a Southern front porch.**

## Harm Reduction

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Since our founding, harm reduction has been the core guiding principle of our work. Harm reduction originated in drug using communities, but has since expanded to many other arenas. At its core, **harm reduction is a commitment to meeting community members “where they’re at,”** and to addressing the conditions in which harm arises, along with reducing the harm itself.

Harm reduction demands that interventions and policies – whether they are designed to serve drug users or other communities – reflect and respond to specific individual and community needs instead of imposing solutions rooted in someone else’s agenda. Harm reduction does not presume that people need to change their behaviors or survival strategies – instead we are all responsible for creating conditions that will reduce harm and increase safety for everyone.

For WWAV **harm reduction means that we work to remove barriers to resources, including those created by criminalization, to enable people to make their own decisions for their health and wellbeing. We do not make decisions for people, or pretend to know what’s best for them.** At the end of the day we know that we cannot pay someone’s rent or immediately remove the structural violence or drivers of oppression from their lives, but we can make space for that person to breathe and to navigate the direction they want to go.

At WWAV, we continue to engage in a spectrum of strategies to support safer drug use, and take a harm reduction approach to our work around criminalization, sex worker organizing, and health promotion.

As our foremother Danita puts it, “for WWAV, practicing harm reduction in the South has demanded first and foremost the tenacity to believe in what we believed in. It’s also helped us to hone our ability to change with the times and continue to be open to new ways of doing things, which we are always developing in partnership with the drug user and sex worker communities with whom we stand.”

At the local and national levels, WWAV has played a critical role in centering the unique needs, circumstances, and perspectives of Black women in harm reduction programs, services, and policy, whether the issue is drug use, trading sex, or any strategy women engage in to survive.



## Reproductive Justice

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Black women, Indigenous women, women of color, and trans\* people have always fought for reproductive autonomy, self-determination and justice. The term “reproductive justice” (RJ) was coined in 1994 by a group of Black women gathered in Chicago to expand the more narrow “reproductive rights” framework advanced by predominantly white-led organizations which did not center the needs of women of color and other marginalized women and trans\* people. Sistersong, a national women of color organization that WWAV is a leading member of, defines **reproductive justice as: “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”**

As WWAV Director of Reproductive Health and Justice Lakeesha Harris puts it, “For me reproductive justice is healing justice – if we want healthy communities, we have to align ourselves with what reproductive justice means.” **Every aspect of WWAV’s work is rooted in advancing Black women’s bodily autonomy and reproductive self-determination in ways that include an analysis of economic, structural, historical, and contemporary constraints on our power.**

## Front Porch Strategy

At WWAV, we believe in the revolutionary things that happen on a Southern front porch – where our journey began. Our grassroots work grows from and is ever accountable to the truths that Black women have always shared on front porches. In this tradition, we host regular community story circles and meetings that engage the people we work with in reflecting on their everyday experiences at the intersections of structural violence through mass incarceration, police violence, systemic poverty, gender-based violence, premature death through drug criminalization, and HIV vulnerability. Our “front porch strategy” is the engine that drives all of our work.



## Our Work:

Rooted in these frameworks, Women With A Vision's core guiding principles are that people should not be criminalized for what they do with their own bodies, and should be empowered to prevent disease and improve their overall wellbeing in any way that is available.

While our founding was driven by health promotion and community outreach, we have since expanded our focus to include policy advocacy aimed at changing the structural conditions that negatively affect women and communities of color in Louisiana and beyond. Our major areas of work today include:

- Advancing Reproductive Justice
- Realizing Harm Reduction and Drug Policy Reform
- Challenging Criminalization
- Supporting Sex Worker Rights
- Promoting Women's Health
- Ending the HIV Epidemic
- Fighting for LGBTQ Rights

**Through advocacy, community outreach and health education, supportive services, integrated voter engagement, youth programming and community-based participatory research, we stand alongside marginalized women, their families, and their communities, and walk beside them to address the social conditions that hinder their health and wellbeing in each of these areas.**

## On the Front Lines of Reproductive Justice

Access to abortion, comprehensive reproductive health care, and sex education have always been and remain tenuous in Louisiana, particularly for Black, low-income, and rural women. Louisiana lawmakers have consistently resisted implementation of *Roe v. Wade* since the decision was first handed down, and led the way in imposing burdensome restrictions on abortion like parental notification and mandatory waiting periods. In 2019 the state legislature passed and the Governor signed into law a complete ban on abortion the minute *Roe* is overturned.

Taking a stand for reproductive justice in the South has often come with high risks and taken a high toll. For instance, in the mid 1980s, several Louisiana clinics were targeted for bomb threats and arson. In 2012, Women With A Vision's offices were broken into and burned down under circumstances suggesting that the organization was targeted because of the reproductive health services we provide, our stand on universal abortion access, and our advocacy on behalf of sex workers, trans\* people and other marginalized members of our communities. Thankfully no one was hurt, but the WWAV house on N Jefferson Davis Parkway in Mid-City New Orleans was destroyed.



In a statement released the day of the fire, Executive Director Deon Haywood Deon insisted that WWAV would be stronger, act bolder, and dream bigger, just as our foremothers had done, telling supporters "the work will continue. It's not going to stop us from speaking out for people who don't have a voice ... This just gives us more fuel to continue the fight for justice for people in our community. **We are fighters...we are warriors here at Women With A Vision, and we will continue our work.**"

We stayed true to this promise. While working hard to rebuild, we continued to do work in the community by returning to our roots as a street-based harm reduction organization until we moved into our new home in 2015 on North Broad Street.

To this day, WWAV continues to fight undeterred at the local, state and national levels for comprehensive reproductive health care, including universal and unrestricted abortion access. In 2019 we led resistance to passage of yet another complete abortion ban. During the campaign, several New Orleans organizations, including Women With A Vision, the New Orleans Abortion Fund, the New Orleans Workers' Center, the New Orleans People's Assembly, Black Youth Project100, and the New Orleans Hospitality Alliance, delivered the following demands, rooted in our expansive vision of reproductive justice, to the Louisiana legislature:



1. **We demand abortion access unapologetically and on demand, with no unconstitutional demands and bans.**
2. **Stop treating women and people who have the ability to gestate as second-class citizens.**
3. **We want full control of our bodies and a complete investigation as to why black women are dying in childbirth.**
4. **We demand full social support, and not just lip-service or inaccessible services, when we have children.**
5. **Comprehensive sexual education and contraception access without barriers to access.**
6. **We demand a state minimum wage increase to \$15 per hour and pay equity across all labor.**
7. **Fully funded childcare centers and increased funding for early childhood education.**
8. **Abolishment of the money bail system and the prison system, inclusive of detention centers.**
9. **Food and housing security and medicine access for poor people.**
10. **End condoned violence, via laws and action, to LGBTQ people in Louisiana.**



**"We want full control of our bodies, and goddam it, we're not asking."**

**– Lakeesha Harris, WWAV Director of Reproductive Health and Justice**

## Taking to the Streets: Realizing Harm Reduction and Drug Policy Reform



Women With A Vision has engaged in traditional harm reduction practices since our founding, working within communities through outreach programs promoting safe use and disposal of syringes and access to community medical and psychosocial health referrals. Our harm reduction workers continue to regularly distribute clean needles, bleach kits, crack kits, wound care kits, condoms, lube, and basic health education, information, and counseling in our communities, much as our foremothers did. Overdose remains a life-threatening issue in Black communities – and one that is often misunderstood and under resourced. WWAV is raising Naloxone awareness

across the city and creating access to the information necessary to save a life during an overdose. As with all of our work, we prioritize working with our communities who are most under-served by existing programs in the city. For instance, we run dedicated evening outreach for Black LGBTQ young people, and we are currently the only street outreach team targeting long neglected communities of Charbonnet, the West Bank, and Algiers.

In partnership with our community, **we extend our harm reduction work to fighting for drug policies grounded in science, compassion, health, and human rights.** The policy fights we pick are directly accountable to the most urgent and persistent structural needs that we learn about through street outreach. In national policy conversations, we consistently work to put the South and the needs of women first.

## Challenging Criminalization

### *Centering Black Women in Criminal Justice Reform*

**Women With A Vision works in New Orleans, one of the cities with the highest rates of incarceration per person in the world.** Mass criminalization and mass incarceration are epidemic in the city, across Louisiana, and in the Deep South.

Louisiana ranks in the top 20 states in the U.S. when it comes to the rate of women’s incarceration, exceeding the national average and rates of incarceration of women around the world. Yet of the greatest obstacles we face in our work to confront the crisis of criminalization is the often-unnamed assumption that incarceration is exclusively men’s problem. WWAV works to counter this assumption by highlighting the impact of criminalization on women, their families, and communities, and standing beside and organizing with incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated cis and trans\* women to change policy, decarcerate communities, and pave the way for women coming home.

In 2016, the State of Louisiana embarked on an ambitious criminal justice reform legislative agenda aimed at reducing incarceration across the State. WWAV played a unique and critical role in ensuring that the reforms on the table would address the unique circumstances contributing to the incarceration of Black women. At the same time WWAV built relationships with Black women legislators and voters across the state to generate support for key provisions, producing a fact sheet for women’s groups and racial justice organizations highlighting which proposals on the table were critical to Black women and their families.



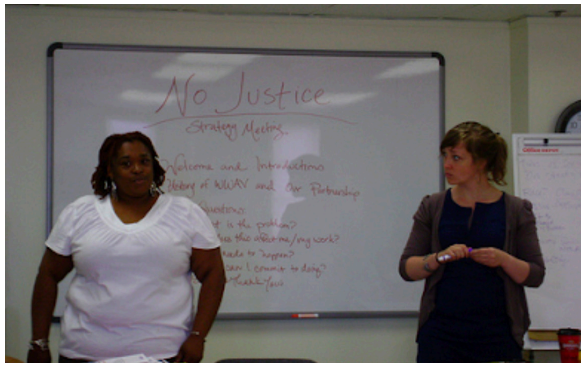
**In 2017 and 2018, WWAV participated in the national Mama's Day Bailout led by Southerners on New Ground and the National Bailout collective.** Through this collaboration, we worked to illuminate the consequences of pretrial detention for Black mothers and caregivers struggling with some of the highest rates of poverty in the country and the greatest burdens of mass incarceration on their families and communities, who can't afford bail of even a few hundred dollars, and languish in local jails as a result, with severe consequences for their health and wellbeing, safety, and employment, housing, and child custody. Once bailed out, WWAV staff provided case management service.

**N**

This issue first came to our attention in 2007 when a woman came into our office and showed us her driver's license with a big orange sex offender [marking] on it. Since then we've heard dozens of stories from women who are on the registry because of this charge. . . . They are grandmothers and mothers. They have struggled with poverty and many have struggled with addiction. They did what they had to do to survive, to put food on the table. Not only are many of the women we are talking about . . . survivors of rape and domestic violence, they are also survivors of police violence, including sexual harassment, physical abuse, improper strip searches and rape by law enforcement officers. . . . Many of the [domestic violence] shelters here won't take them, the drug treatment programs won't take them, neither will the homeless shelters. . . . They have served their time, but now they have to serve an additional sentence, often a life sentence.

- WWAV Executive Director Deon Haywood speaking at a press conference launching the NO Justice Campaign

**JUSTICE**



## No Justice

The charge in question is “crime against nature by solicitation” or CANS, which criminalizes offering or engaging in oral or anal sex for compensation. For 30 years CANS was a felony, carrying a penalty of up to 5 years in prison and mandatory registration as a sex offender for 15 years to life upon release. Police and prosecutors had complete discretion when deciding whether to charge someone with CANS or misdemeanor prostitution, which criminalized the exact same conduct and more, but never required sex offender registration. Predictably, when CANS was enforced in a context in which Black women’s sexualities have historically and continue to be framed as deviant, low-income Black women, including transgender women, were disproportionately charged with CANS instead of prostitution and required to register as sex offenders. In 2011, before the registration requirement was struck down, 97 percent of women on the sex offender registry in Orleans Parish were there because of a CANS conviction, and an overwhelming majority were Black.

**Centering the stories of women we worked with, WVAV convened a national coalition of women’s health and reproductive justice organizers, policy advocates working on criminal legal reform, LGBT and HIV/AIDS activists to map out a multi-strategy campaign to eliminate the CANS sex offender registration requirement.** WVAV led a successful legislative campaign to change the law to equalize the penalties for CANS and prostitution, and invited the Center for Constitutional Rights, Black feminist lawyer Andrea J. Ritchie, and the Loyola Law School legal clinic to file litigation which ultimately struck down the sex offender registration requirement and removed over 800 people from the sex offender registry, including dozens of Women With A Vision clients and community members.

**One of the many strengths of our litigation, advocacy, and organizing strategy is that it applied a reproductive justice frame to issues of criminalization and gender-based violence,** linking all populations whose sexuality is framed as deviant and whose struggles to survive are criminalized. As one the clients in the lawsuit put it, “They only charge poor Black women, trans women and gay men with this charge – we’re all queer out here.” We not only demanded and secured an end to an unjust law, we raised awareness of and challenged the use of policing and punishment of poverty, drug use, sexual and gender nonconformity among Black women.

## *Diversion and Decriminalization*

We didn't stop there. **Women With A Vision has always unapologetically stood by sex workers and resisted all the ways in which women and trans\* people struggling to survive are policed, punished, and denied sexual and economic self-determination.**

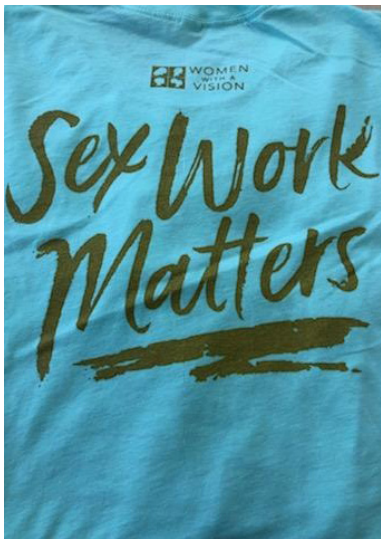
In New Orleans, most individuals who are arrested for prostitution-related charges are Black women (cis and trans\*) and femmes who are living below the poverty line and engaging in sex work for survival. This is not surprising given the institutionalized and systemic racism that is deeply rooted in the history of our city. Gentrification and lack of economic opportunities have pushed marginalized, Black women further away from supportive services and resources and have offered little choice, but to turn to criminalized street-based economies. Even though the CANS sex offender registration requirement is no longer on the books, the women we work with continue to suffer the harms of being arrested, incarcerated, and criminalized for trading sex to survive.

In 2014, WWAV entered into an MOU with New Orleans Municipal Court, District Attorney's Office, City Attorney and Public Defender to create a program funded by the New Orleans Racial Justice Improvement Project to divert people arrested on misdemeanor prostitution charges from prosecution.

The Crossroads Diversion Program offers women an alternative to incarceration through participation in a client created service plan which can include GED/HISET classes, job readiness and stress management workshops, and case-management sessions with WWAV staff. When they complete the program, the charges against them are dismissed. **The Crossroads program is unique in that participants are not required to pay supervision costs, fines, or fees, and are not subject to drug testing.** As Christine Breland Lobre, WWAV's Program Director puts it, "Many diversion programs have people still shackled but in community. We wanted to make sure those restrictions are not present here." Since its inception, 680 people have been referred to our program and 78% have completed it. In 2017 we negotiated an agreement with the New Orleans City Council and Police Department resulting in legislation mandating officers arresting people for prostitution to charge them with municipal, rather than state offenses, thereby substituting citations for arrests and increasing access to our diversion program.

**WWAV also doesn't believe people should have to be arrested to get access to the things they need.** All of our case management services are available to all women, femmes and gender nonconforming folks, regardless of involvement with the criminal legal system, through the Emerge program. Emerge focuses on holistic healing for women and building healthy relationships and stronger communities together. Through life-skills classes, community gatherings, story circles, workshops, and discussion groups, participants explore health, life, and working together to build community power. The five program areas of Emerge include: (1) Holistic and Transformative Healing; (2) Social Service Navigation; (3) Community Organizing, Civic Participation, and Community Advocacy; (4) Community Storytelling and Cultural Sharing; and (5) Life Skills and Mentorship.





## Divestment from Criminalization

We are also working to stop arrests from happening in the first place by building toward a campaign to decriminalize prostitution in New Orleans, and to reduce police calls for “quality of life” offenses in low-income Black communities and develop creative community-based solutions to issues currently resolved through the criminal legal system.

In furtherance of the Divest/Invest strategy outlined in the Vision for Black Lives articulated by the Movement for Black Lives, **WWAV seeks to defund institutions of systematic oppression and increase investment of tax dollars and funding streams into social service programs that meet the needs of communities marginalized by predatory policing, racially disparate sentencing policies and the destabilizing effects of the criminalization of race and poverty.**

## Supporting Sex Workers

Since our founding, WWAV’s work to address the structural conditions contributing to HIV vulnerability in New Orleans has taken us to the streets. **For 30 years, we’ve worked alongside women in New Orleans’ street-based economies, including women in the sex trades, strategizing with them around everyday and long-term methods for promoting their health and well-being, including resisting criminalization.** Regardless of the reasons a person enters the sex trade, whether by choice, circumstance or coercion, sex workers are vulnerable to human rights violations due to criminalization, which leads to increased discrimination and inequality.



Grounded in the complex realities of the women we are in relationship with, Women With A Vision offers a unique, critical and pathbreaking voice in local, state and national conversations about sex work and trafficking. **Applying our founding principle that our organizing and advocacy must be based in women’s truths and solutions, we have brought the voices and experiences of people who trade sex to survive under a range of circumstances to the table, insisting that we are experts in our own lives and in developing solutions to the conditions we face and violence we experience.** We have highlighted how predatory policing tactics, draconian laws enforced by overzealous prosecutors and the human trafficking movement have come together to shackle sex workers in New Orleans and the Deep South. We work to unravel the nuances of consensual and coerced sex work to honor and respond to the multi-faceted truths of our constituents without further fueling the carceral feminist movement. Through this work, we have brought a more complex and complete analysis of deeply polarized issues of sex work and trafficking to the local anti-trafficking task force, national anti-violence advocacy, and international deliberations at the United Nations.

We have also joined in advocacy around regulations for dancers in the French Quarter and resistance to police raids on Bourbon Street. We successfully advocated for changes to the antiquated provisions of the New Orleans Alcohol and Beverage Ordinance that targeted people and places believed to be involved in prostitution, and kept people whose spouses have a felony conviction from obtaining a liquor license. WWAV is leading efforts to call for amnesty from arrest and prosecution for individuals engaged in the sex trade or subject to other solicitation-related arrests, including public nuisance,



lewd conduct in public, prostitution solicitation, and loitering for the purpose of soliciting prostitution who report crimes perpetrated against them or that they are witness to, including extortion, stalking, or a violent felony. We also regularly distribute Health Within the Hustle holistic health care kits for people in the sex trade who are unwilling or unable to access more traditional medical care due to discrimination and abuse.

We also continue to lead and support sex worker organizing in New Orleans, with a focus on supporting sex workers pushed to the margins and subject to predatory policing as they struggle for survival. In 2016 WWAV co-hosted a national gathering of sex workers convened by the Desiree Alliance. In 2017, WWAV held the first annual Black & Brown Sex Worker Second Line which culminated in a gathering under Claiborne bridge providing resources. Using second line, a tradition of Black New Orleans to give voice to women often deeply marginalized in our communities, this event acknowledges, honors and uplifts the Black and Brown sex workers while pushing back on the increased criminalization and demonization of sex workers in both local and national politics. As Lakeesha Harris, Director of Reproductive and Health Justice, says, **"Our message is simple. Sex work should be decriminalized, and sex workers should be supported because they support their communities."**



# Promoting Women's Health



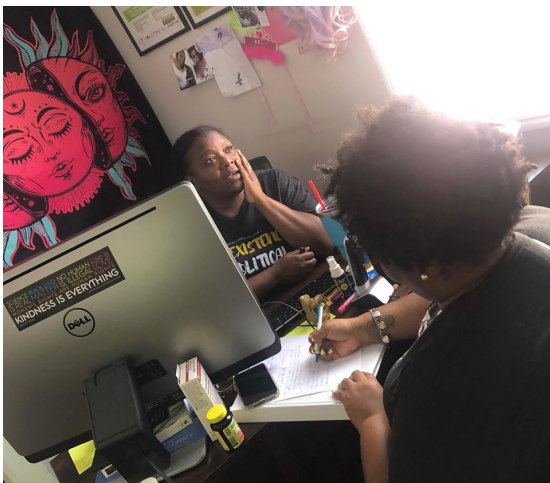
As part of our ongoing health promotion work, WWAV conducts street outreach and small group workshops on women's health issues, including breast and cervical cancer, diabetes, obesity, and sexual and reproductive health. Our monthly free Community Care Night offers healing services centering queer people of color and community organizers. We also work to expand access to healthcare and services, develop community and academic partnerships to address community health needs, create awareness among legislators and the general public concerning the effects of proposed and existing legislation on community health, access, and women's overall and reproductive health; and offer grassroots advocacy training workshops and leadership development.



## *Young Women With A Vision (YWWAV)*

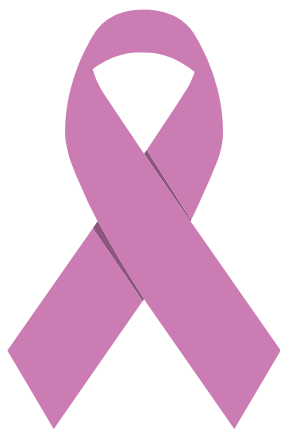
Building on our history, Women With A Vision has also created a space for growth, learning, and healing in which young Black women can come together and help one another unpack their experiences, understand their personal and political identities, gain the knowledge, skills, and support needed to thrive, and decompress from the stresses of their daily lives. YWWAV strives to be a program that works with youth rather than on them. YWWAV members come from a wide range of social, economic, and academic backgrounds. The program is dynamic and everchanging in response to the feedback and needs of YWWAV participants. Under the leadership of Program Manager Mwendu Katwiwa,

YWWAV evolved to include a leadership development track, court support for criminalized youth, and paid community-based summer internships that enable participants to support their families while gaining skills for future employment. That is how we work to equip Black girls in New Orleans with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate life at the intersections of all their identities, and to promote their social, emotional, and cultural education, leadership and wellbeing.



## *Gender-based violence prevention*

In 2014, Women With A Vision launched a program to raise awareness and address the stigma around domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking specifically aimed at Black women and LGBTQ women survivors, and particularly communities for whom calling the police is not an option. We also provide support services and advocate for culturally-specific services across the host of violence-intervention programs available in New Orleans. WWAV also partners with the federal Victims of Crime Act Administrators to offer resources to people who have experienced crime.



# Her Existence is Political

In 2016 Women With A Vision's Executive Director Deon Haywood was diagnosed with breast cancer. Living into the organization's motto, she immediately began sharing her journey to healing with the broader WWAV community, giving voice to the experiences of cancer patients navigating a medical industrial complex which often dehumanizes and denies them quality, affordable, accessible, and holistic care, of Black women whose particular history of medical abuse, control and neglect is rarely recognized or addressed by providers, and of Black lesbians navigating heteronormative educational materials and programs focused on helping women's "husbands" to adjust to their "wives'" breast cancer diagnosis and changes to their bodies.

Each step of the way Deon collectivized her experience in ways that reflect the organization's vision, highlighting the importance of our stories and relationships to Black women's survival, of peer education for harm reduction, and of standing in her dignity, demanding bodily and reproductive autonomy and self-determination in each interaction with medical providers. Countless survivors and community members have testified to the ways in which her battle inspires their own.



After a cancer-free year, Deon found another lump, and insisted on testing, which confirmed the return of the disease. As she was after the fire at WWAV's offices, she remains determined to continue the work, declaring herself a fighter and breast cancer warrior. **Please support Deon on her healing journey by donating here:**

<https://www.caringbridge.org/visit/deonhaywood/support>

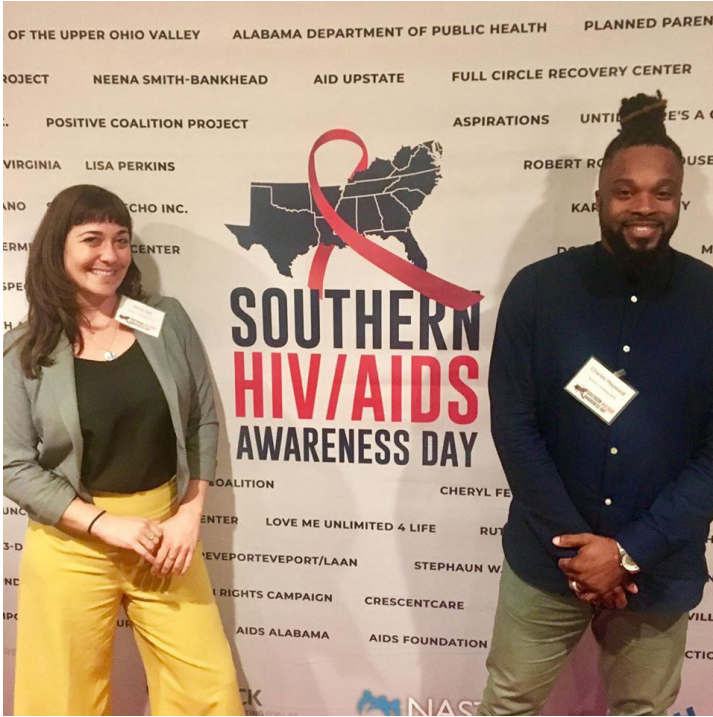
<https://www.gofundme.com/f/deonhaywood>

## Ending the Epidemic (EtE)

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As long as the United States continues to promote and maintain economically repressive policies, communities will continue to be at risk for HIV. This epidemic can affect anyone, but HIV is particularly hard on low-income communities and communities of color.

**Since our founding, WWAV has worked to ensure the latest HIV prevention information is in the hands of community members who need it most through awareness and prevention-based education.** We host peer-directed groups providing emotional support for women living with HIV/AIDS, their families, and social networks, as well as education on sexual health and STD prevention.



In 2018, WWAV launched an Ending the Epidemic (EtE) program in partnership with the Office of Public Health. Many community leaders across the United States are calling for an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in their cities, their counties, and their states through the development of EtE plans. EtE entails shifting paradigms and creating ambitious plans with robust goals to improve health outcomes for all people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and reduce the virus's impact by bringing new infections below epidemic levels.

Our EtE team will be working alongside community members, health providers, public health agencies, and community-based organizations to create working groups and develop recommendations and action plans that reflect the needs of people living with HIV and

those in affected communities in Louisiana. Throughout this process, we will center smaller cities, rural communities, and the experiences of people living with HIV (PLWH) above all else. The project will culminate in release of a plan in Spring 2020, which will serve as a model to be shared across the state of Louisiana. **Through this grassroots, community-driven approach, we are committed to developing an EtE plan for Louisiana that is racially just, strategic, and grounded in human rights principles.** Our vision for this work is guided by and accountable to the Declaration of Liberation developed by the HIV Racial Justice Now network, of which we are a founding steering committee member.

## Fighting For LGBTQ Rights

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**Women With A Vision works for a society in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender-variant, and transgender (LGBTQ) people have the freedom to live and love openly and as they choose.** As New Orleans' oldest queer, Black women-led organization, WWAV has been speaking our truth and fighting for LGBTQ health, rights, and justice for more than two decades. We organize against discrimination, interpersonal and state violence, and the mass criminalization of LGBTQ communities of color in New Orleans and the South. We also work to ensure the health and wellness of LGBTQ communities through linkages to supportive services and healthcare, support groups, and safe spaces for the LGBTQ community to talk about their experiences and share their stories. In 2017, WWAV began partnering with Black Pride Educational Events, an annual event to educate and connect the Black LGBTQ community.



**30 YEARS OF IMPACT**

# Growing Change:



## Building Power to Make Change: Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE)

To advance our policy agendas in each of these program areas, Women With A Vision launched an integrated voter engagement (IVE) program called ENVISION|CHANGE in 2016.

Through our IVE program, we aim to increase voter education, voter turnout, and overall civic participation amongst marginalized women and their families across Louisiana. **We focus on mobilization of unregistered, rare, and infrequent Black women voters through a grassroots approach that supports the people most impacted in organizing their own communities:** we hire people from all of WWAV's other programs to work as canvassers. Our IVE team goes beyond traditional voter mobilization efforts to build analysis and power in their own communities, using the same ground-up model that has guided WWAV for the last 30 years. Our IVE program highlights the stories, concerns, and important issues impacting our communities, creating a space for Black women to gather to envision and mobilize for change.



# LOOKING FORWARD

WWAV stands with the communities who are most criminalized in our country historically and today: Black people, and particularly Black women, queer, trans and gender nonconforming folks, poor people, sex workers and drug users, and folks living with HIV. We know that criminalization as a structural and systemic problem goes far beyond a discrete set of laws. Criminalization is the lifeblood of this country: it is produced and reproduced through every institution in our society by the people who are making the laws; it is also perpetuated through the intentions of those who enforce them.

Working from this analysis of criminalization changes the way we approach our policy work. We do not set legislative or legal goals for our work; we are working for the liberation of our people. **For our people challenging criminalization, advancing reproductive justice, realizing harm reduction and drug policy reform, supporting sex worker rights, promoting women’s health, ending the HIV epidemic, and fighting for LGBTQ rights are all interrelated struggles.** We know that if we repeal one law, the system will just find different laws to uphold structural oppressions. While decriminalization of sex work and drug use are both necessary steps in our long-term work to advance human rights and labor rights, and to end the segregation from community and resources caused by criminalization and stigma, the fight extends far beyond decriminalization. That is why we are also working towards divestment from law enforcement and carceral systems through a grassroots organizing and visioning process for creating and bringing funding to unique, community-based solutions.

As we celebrate our 30th anniversary and look forward to the next 30 years, this long-term vision of transformation and liberation is what guides us. **Our organization was birthed in the protest of Black women building the world that we need.** In the late-1980s and early 1990s, our foremothers turned neighborhood barrooms into underground needle exchanges as a challenge to the targeted criminalization of drug users, and the government’s willful neglect of structural vulnerability to HIV in Black communities that it is itself creating through economic, social and health policies. After Hurricane Katrina, we opened WWAV up to sex workers who were being criminalized into oblivion, creating a place where they could make home, find respite, and organize into a more livable future. And in the seven years since the arson attack on our office, WWAV has risen bigger and bolder than ever, moving steadily with our community to advance a comprehensive vision for decriminalization, divestment from policing and punishment, ending the HIV epidemic, defending reproductive rights and abortion access, ensuring access to direct services, and building political power.

**This is the work. There are no victims at WWAV. We support our people to stand in their own power.** We believe that when we support women in realizing their hopes and dreams, we are supporting entire communities. Our work began with Black women’s stories, truths, solutions, relationships, and community – and that is what will drive it forward.

## Our existence is political.



# OUR PEOPLE



## Staff



### **Deon Haywood: Executive Director**

For more than 25 years, Deon has worked as a human rights defender and advocate for Black women, working class and low-income women, and LGBTQ communities in the Deep South. As the Executive Director of Women With A Vision (WWAV) in New Orleans, she led the organization after Hurricane Katrina in successfully changing the “crime against nature” statute that was used to require people engaged in street-based sex work to register as sex offenders. Through her relentless advocacy, she has grown WWAV into a leading voice on Black women and criminalization in the American South, advancing community-led policy solutions on the international and national stages and at home in Louisiana. For this work, she has been honored with numerous awards by groups across the United States in recognition of her leadership at the intersection of HIV/AIDS, harm reduction, LGBTQ rights, reproductive justice, anti-criminalization, and ending mass incarceration, including the Center for Constitutional Rights, SisterSong, Ms. Foundation, National

Organization of Women (NOW), ACLU Louisiana, the Human Rights Campaign, the Red Door Foundation, Philadelphia FIGHT, Planned Parenthood, Forum for Equality, TheBody.com, BET.com, and Frontline Defender’s Dublin Platform. In 2018, she was appointed to the New Orleans Human Relations Commission to advance this body’s work on Human Rights and Equity.



### **Shaquita Borden: Director of Research & Evaluation**

Shaquita has been with WWAV since 2008. She was born and raised in New Orleans and was prompted, after volunteering with WWAV, to change careers. Shaquita is passionate about working to improve the health of the city's residents using a participatory approach to understand the structural drivers of women's health disparities. She earned her M.P.H. from Louisiana State University's School of Public Health and her B.A. Dillard University, and is working towards her PhD in Health Education and Health Promotion at University of Alabama at Birmingham. In 2013, Shaquita was awarded the Billy R. Cox Endowed Scholarship in recognition of her work on public health issues for the gay, lesbian, bi and trans-gender populations.



### **Christine Breland Lobre: Program Director**

Christine is a New Orleans native who came to Women With A Vision as an intern in the summer of 2014 to complete her Masters of Public Health with a concentration in Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at LSUHSC. Prior to that, she received a Masters degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. After working as a substance abuse counselor and community-based counselor, Christine decided to change her career path to focus on harm reduction and dismantling the drivers of systemic racism and carceral feminism. She sought out WWAV to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to work to reduce health disparities and promote social justice. Christine supervises many of the programs offered at WWAV and focuses on centering the voices and experiences of marginalized women.



### **Lakeesha J. Harris: Director of Reproductive Health and Justice**

Lakeesha is the Director of Reproductive Health and Justice at WWAV. Previous positions held by Lakeesha include being a Health Educator, Community Health Worker, and Alternative Insemination Coordinator at Chicago Women's Health Center, one of the last remaining feminist health centers in the country. As a community healer, Lakeesha's primary focus is on centering complete health care access for Black people, specifically queer and trans Black people, who are often shut out of services that are culturally affirming, financially accessible, and whole being centered. Lakeesha holds a Bachelor's Degree in Women and Gender Studies from Northeastern

Illinois University and Master's level credits in Political Science. In 2011, she was selected as a Student Laureate of NEIU and received numerous awards for her work as a community activist, poet, and one of the Founders of Seeds Literary Arts Journal of NEIU. She is a playwright whose collaborative political literary work, Spirit House, was commissioned by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center for the educational engagement and healing of the community. As a practicing healer, her work has spanned more than two decades and evolved from her roots as a Certified Nurse Assistant, Doula, Apprentice Midwife and Community Health Worker. Lakeesha was recently trained as a Street Medic with Chicago Action Medical and is a practicing Reiki Master - Teacher.



### **Michelle Wiley: Crossroads Case Manager**

Michelle is a Mississippi native who relocated to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Michelle has worked over twenty-five years in social services, mental health, and community advocacy. She holds a Bachelor's of Science in Social Services with a minor in Education from the University of Southern Mississippi. Before coming to Women With A Vision, Michelle worked as a case manager in the medical field assisting individuals with mental disabilities who were not able to receive proper resources to manage daily living. Upon relocating she was hired at Women With A Vision where she oversees our Crossroads Diversion program. She helps to meet the needs of clients and their families by providing case management services and

facilitating group sessions. Michelle works diligently advocating for her clients to get their charges dropped once completing the program. Her passion is making sure they have the resources, proper skills that are needed to cope with the streets of New Orleans.



### **Raven Frederick: Community Outreach Specialist**

Raven is a native of New Orleans with several years of experience as a case manager, community health worker, and outreach worker in Orleans and Jefferson parishes. Before coming to WWAV, Raven worked as a community health worker promoting women's health through education and community resources by working to decrease the infant mortality rate among African-Americans in both Jefferson and Orleans Parish. Raven holds a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, La. and a Master's Degree in Health Service Administration from Strayer University. Raven is a Certified Community Health Worker from Tulane University, and a Certified Medicaid Representative from the Department of

Health and Hospitals. Whether helping one child, assisting one woman, or strengthening one family through women's health promotion and prevention activities, Raven is committed to the health and wellbeing of New Orleans families.



### **Catherine Haywood: Community Health Promoter**

A native of New Orleans and a long-time community health advocate, Catherine has worked in health education and community outreach for more than 25 years. She was one of the co-founders of Women With A Vision. Over the years her work has focused on addressing health disparities among under-served populations in New Orleans, centering on HIV/AIDS, harm reduction, women's health issues, obesity, and physical activity promotion. Catherine is very passionate about making sure grassroots community members – not just heads of community agencies – are at the table and truly heard when public health research and programs are being designed.

Her leadership experience includes heading several national and local committees. She is chair of the Louisiana Community Health Outreach Network (LACHON), a board member of the Louisiana Cancer Control Partnership, a board member of the American Cancer Society's Circle of Friends for Education and Early-Detection Program, and the Co-Regional Director of the Southern Region for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Community Committee, to name a few. Currently, along with serving as the Community Health Promoter at WWAV, she is the Community Service Program Manager at the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.



### **Dianne Jones: Outreach Coordinator**

Originally from the 6th ward of New Orleans, Dianne is a formerly-incarcerated mother, community organizer, and advocate for currently and formerly-incarcerated women and mothers in New Orleans. A former volunteer at VOTE (Voice of the Ex-Offender) and a volunteer doing juvenile-justice work with youth in Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools, Dianne is currently an Outreach Worker with WWAV, coordinating our work with formerly-incarcerated women and girls. Dianne was first incarcerated at the age of 14. In the years following, she was trapped in the criminal justice system and sent to a number of institutions before her incarceration at

Orleans Parish Prison in the early 1990s (at a time considered by some to be the height of the jail's most dysfunctional and inhumane treatment of prisoners). After her release from Orleans Parish Prison, and having witnessed the massive injustices facing prisoners, Dianne was moved to organize with currently and formerly-incarcerated women. She noticed a glaring need for services and a lack of support pre- and post-release. She founded Phenomenal Women, a collective of women making space for formerly-incarcerated women and helping them to get back on their feet and reclaim their dignity. She is also a member of Mothers of Tough Sentencing, a group of women advocates whose children are currently incarcerated in Louisiana.



### **Elyse Degree: Data Coordinator**

Elyse has joined WWAV family as the data coordinator for Women With A Vision's Integrated Voter Engagement Program. Elyse is a New Orleans native with experience and knowledge in community outreach, juvenile justice, and case management. She received her Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice and Forensic Science from Loyola University of New Orleans. Elyse's love for the city of New Orleans, combined with her own experiences as a mother and community servant, fuel her passion for advocacy and outreach for underrepresented communities. Elyse will continue to strive relentlessly for the betterment of marginalized women, their families, and our community.



### **Jenny Holl: Program Manager**

Jenny grew up in San Francisco, but has called New Orleans home since 2016. In her time here, she has worked on various projects aimed at improving access to reproductive health services, ranging from research on abortion restrictions and experiences with care during pregnancy, to reducing financial barriers to emergency contraception and abortion services through local community-based organizations. Previously, she has worked on programs relating to maternal mortality, sex worker rights, and HIV/AIDS. She is excited by joining WWAV as the Ending the Epidemic Program Manager, which will allow her to work with communities across Louisiana to

take control of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in our state. She is committed to finding solutions that allow us to increase access to testing and comprehensive treatment, and that reduce stigma and other barriers to care in order to achieve greater health and well-being. Jenny holds a Master of Public Health, with concentration on Global Sexual and Reproductive Health and Population Studies from Emory University in Atlanta and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara.



**Charles Haywood: Program Associate**

Charles is a native and resident of New Orleans, LA., who has twenty years of advocacy, community service, social service and prevention/education experience. Having worked for several CBOs, health clinics and family support organizations, he has had the opportunity to implement and facilitate focus groups promoting healthy behaviors, provide support systems within the LGBTQ community, provide case management services, and lead peer education projects. He most recently worked as a PrEP Navigator. Charles looks forward to working with WWAV as the Ending The Epidemic Program Associate and the opportunities it provides statewide to create necessary conversations, address stigma and reduce risks within communities that are considered at risk.



**Ericka (Ricky) Sanchez: Administrative Assistant**

Ricky came to Women With A Vision in June 2019 after completing her Masters in English at Tulane University. A Brooklyn native, Ricky began organizing against gentrification and its effects on local communities when people in her hometown of Bushwick began to be priced out of their neighborhoods, causing irreparable damage to community and culture. During her undergraduate career at Tulane, Ricky dedicated her studies to better understanding the systemic racism and oppression affecting her community in New York and those like it in New Orleans, eventually becoming a leader against racism, heterosexism, and sexual violence on campus. Ricky came to WWAV seeking to put into practice what she often

requested of other outsiders in rapidly gentrifying cities: invest in the community that makes a great city what it is. Ricky manages day-to-day administrative duties at WWAV and is the Project Assistant for WWAV’s police divestment study.

**Board**

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*Organizations listed for identification purposes only.*

**Laura McTighe, PhD, Assistant Professor, Florida State University**

Laura McTighe is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Florida State University and the Co-Founder and Associate Director of Front Porch Research Strategy in New Orleans. As an interdisciplinary scholar of gender, race, religion, and social movements, she studies the often-hidden histories of struggle that fill our present, and asks how practitioners use religion to organize and transform our world. Her research and teaching take shape in and are sustained through twenty years of work in our nation’s movements to end AIDS and prisons. She is the co-founder of the Institute for Community Justice in Philadelphia, and currently serves on the boards of Men & Women In Prison Ministries in Chicago and Reconstruction Inc. in Philadelphia. In partnership with WWAV’s Deon Haywood, Laura has published articles in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society (2018) and Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society (2017) on WWAV’s 30-year history of organizing against sex work criminalization through a Black feminist lens, and on the centrality of front porches in doing this work.



**Danita Muse**, LCSW, LAC, Retired Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Public Health Practitioner

Danita Muse is a retired Clinical Social Worker Specialist, Licensed Addiction Counselor, Board Clinical Diplomat, and Masters in Public Health in New Orleans. She is one of the founding members of Women With A Vision, Inc. As a harm reductionist, she believes in providing the community with all of the information they need to make an informed decision about their health choices. Danita has a history of providing condom distribution, syringe exchange, health promotion on reproductive health, focus groups on women's health, breast and cervical cancer education, and HIV testing. Danita also has a more than 25-year history of working in substance-abuse treatment programs.

**Melody M. Robinson**, St. Thomas Health Community Health Center

Melody M. Robinson has more than 12 years of experience in community health and public health program development and management. Ms. Robinson currently serves as the Clinical Director of St. Thomas Health Community Health Center. She previously served as the Program Manager for the Louisiana Comprehensive Cancer Control Program. Ms. Robinson was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the State of Louisiana Comprehensive Cancer Plan, regional staff across the state and the development of regional cancer control plans. She also served as the Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Louisiana Cancer Control Partnership. She has also been responsible for the development of the Women's Health Department, Adolescent health Development, and developed the School linked clinic program for St. Thomas. Ms. Robinson has also served as an adjunct Professor for Dillard University and Tulane University School of Public Health. She received a B.S. in Biology from Xavier University of New Orleans and an MPH in Material and Child Health and Health Communication and Education from Tulane University School of Public Health.

**Dr. Michelle Stiaes**, Clinical Psychologist

Michelle Stiaes, Psy.D. is a licensed Clinical Psychologist who has been working in the field of mental health for over 20 years. Dr. Stiaes earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Loyola University in 1990 and a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from Baylor University in 1996. During her training at Baylor, Dr. Stiaes provided psychotherapy and assessment services to children, adolescents, and young adults in the Texas School System. On internship at Tulane University Medical Center, her clinical rotations included the New Orleans Adolescent Hospital, Charity Hospital and the Tulane University Neurology and Psychiatry Clinic. After graduating from Baylor, she spent three years teaching at Dillard University. Dr. Stiaes became licensed in 2000 and immediately accepted a position with Southeast Louisiana Hospital's Developmental Neuropsychiatric Program providing assertive community treatment to children and adolescents who were dually diagnosed with a developmental disability and a psychiatric disorder. After six years of civil service, Dr. Stiaes took a brief hiatus during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to assist the Jewish Board of Children's and Family Services of New York with designing and providing resiliency workshops for mental health professionals who had the difficult task of serving Hurricane Katrina survivors while still having to tend to their own Katrina related affairs. Dr. Stiaes returned to civil service in 2009 and is currently employed by the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities as a Community Psychologist working with individuals of all ages with intellectual/developmental disabilities who exhibit severe challenging behaviors.

## **Acknowledgements**

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