

Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women ANNUAL REPORT FY 2020

BCCSW Vision: To be an effective, inclusive voice and vehicle for action for all women and girls of Berkshire County

Mission

The purpose of the Commission shall be to advance women toward full equity in all areas of life and to promote rights and opportunities for all women. The mission of the Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women (BCCSW) is to provide a permanent, effective voice for women across Berkshire County that facilitates and fosters community and inclusiveness among women. The Commission stands for fundamental freedoms, basic human rights, and the full enjoyment of life for all women throughout their lives.

Commissioners

Donna Morelli, Co-Chair (Pittsfield, MA), Dana Rasso, Co-Chair, Secretary (Pittsfield, MA); Alexandra Demastrie, Vice Chair (Lenox, MA); Christine Haley, Treasurer (Tyringham, MA); Christina Daigneault (Adams, MA); Stephanie Bosley (North Adams, MA).

Halfway through our fiscal year, in December, we said goodbye to commissioners Meg Bossong (Pittsfield), Jennifer Kimball (Pittsfield), and Diane Sturtevant (Windsor). A powerhouse trio, their vast knowledge of the commission, of the county, and of the issues women and girls face here was immeasurably helpful.

We welcomed a new commissioner in May 2020, Andrea Wadsworth of Lee, and are currently working on recruiting two new commissioners to fill the empty slots.

BCCSW Focus

In May 2019, after a successful and illuminating listening session with incarcerated Berkshire County women who were housed at the Western Massachusetts Women's Correctional Center in Chicopee, BCCSW pledged to continue to focus on the intersections of the criminal legal system with the lives of women and girls in Berkshire County. Upon our return from summer break, we outlined our goals for scheduling listening sessions within the county.

In November, we were able to convene a listening session in Pittsfield that also served as the Berkshire County debut and presentation of the Research Report on the Status of Women and Girls in Western Massachusetts 2019, by the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts. Rather than focus strictly on criminal legal issues, we invited community members to attend, listen, and share testimony on the issues they were most concerned about and impacted by.

Attendance at this event was outstanding, with approximately 30 people turning out on a cold and snowy November night. Much of the report's [key findings](#) underlined areas of need in our predominantly rural county that echoed the testimony we had heard from incarcerated women in Chicopee: disparities in healthcare (particularly in mental healthcare and substance use treatment), childcare, and economic stability.

We heard from several women who attended, most of whom worked with girls or women in some capacity—District Attorney Andrea Harrington, a woman from Girls, Inc., in Pittsfield, a woman from Pittsfield Adult Learning Center, and a woman who works with homeless and trafficked youth throughout Western Massachusetts. They also detailed a lack of resources for women and girls (and gender-nonconforming youth) in the county.

The feedback we heard aligned with the commission's stated goals last fiscal year, to wit: doing work to focus on transportation, affordable housing and housing stability, broader access to medical and mental health care and addiction treatment, and economic stability. We ended that evening with new ideas on how addressing socioeconomic disparities through listening sessions would also help inform and expand our focus on the criminal legal system.

The commission also attended and helped to promote a MCSW event in Great Barrington in October. This event was well-attended, predominantly by white, middle-class and upper-middle-class professionals. This is the perennial issue with Berkshire County: It's a sizable area with large(ly white) rural swaths accompanied by a "town and gown" mentality. Like everywhere in the U.S., Berkshire County is also plagued by racism, but because many white people in the county consider it a "liberal, northern, intellectual" haven, they refuse to acknowledge this racism, and often perpetuate it. The county is colloquially broken down into South County, Central County, North County, and "the hilltowns," and it's a challenge getting residents to think of the county as a whole.

We have identified some goals for our future listening sessions, because one thing we have noticed at public events is that attendees tend to be women *who work with women*, rather than the women themselves. This leads us to conclude that to hold successful listening sessions, we need:

- better representation of women experiencing poverty
- childcare
- transport
- multiple events, so as to get a larger representation from more rural areas and areas not serviced by our limited public transport

We eyed MCSW grants to fulfill these needs, but the onset of the COVID-19 has us rethinking what these listening sessions would look like, and postponing them for the near future.

Something we discussed last year, but were unable to do as a result of the pandemic, includes reformatting the legislative breakfast to be an invitation to Berkshire County elected officials to engage with the findings of the listening sessions. We recommit to that for this coming year.

Legislative and Electoral Advocacy

The commission is well aware of the capacity current legislative issues can have on the women and girls of Berkshire County. Many discussions throughout the year focused on proposed legislation such as the Roe Act, which would expand access to abortion care in the state regardless of their age or ability to pay. We also discussed at length how the new Public Charge Law could affect residents of the immigrant community. Continuing our focus on women and girls in relation to the criminal justice system, we discussed current proposed legislation regarding access to phone calls and visitation to incarcerated people, recognizing that limited access to calls and visits was a main concern expressed by the women who testified during the visit to the Hampden County Women's Correctional facility.

In addition to the state commission's legislative priorities, we offered advocacy alerts to contact legislators about issues critical to women and girls in Berkshire County. We met with Debra Falzoi, who founded the National Workplace Bullying Coalition and has proposed legislation in Massachusetts around the topic of workplace dignity/abuse, fair wages, and fair time off. We also met with Shirley Edgerton of ROPE and Maria Rundle of the Flying Cloud Institute to discuss the planning of the MCSW's Girls' Listening Sessions within Berkshire County.

Goals for FY 2021

Our monthly meetings almost always involve report-backs on both institutional and individual racism within our community. Community members who attend our meetings recount experiences they've had personally. At the same time, we are well aware of the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity within our own ranks, and are committed to the recruitment of new Commissioners to broadly represent the geographic, racial, age, and economic diversity of women and girls in Berkshire County. We have chosen to fill the two remaining seats with women who bring new perspectives and lived experience to the commission, and one of our stated goals is to communicate to potential candidates that current or prior substance use, incarceration, and/or mental health issues are not impediments to being on the commission.

It's difficult to say what the next fiscal year will look like for Berkshire County and for our commission. How soon will things return to "normal"; will they ever? What we can say is that we can already see the outside impact the pandemic has had on women in our community. Women head up [80% of single-parent](#) households in Western Massachusetts, they work lower-paying jobs than men, and additional, unpaid labor often falls to them.

One bright spot of the pandemic has been holding online monthly meetings, rather than in-person meetings. We have had many more attendees from the community thanks to the greater ease-of-entry to online conference calls and video calls. If the rules for Open Meetings don't revert to pre-COVID-19 requirements, I sense that we will have greater attendance at our monthly meetings and listening sessions.

We are excited to welcome new commissioners, and to collaborate with women- and girl-led groups in our community to better serve the women and girls of Berkshire County.

Submitted by Dana Rasso