

MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women
Annual Report
June 2020

Mission: Our goal as a Commission, beyond our mission statement as defined in our by-laws, is to strengthen our ability to advocate on behalf of MetroWest women. We seek to do this by listening, learning, and informing ourselves about the issues that matter to the majority of women in our region, determine effective outreach strategies and developing a robust list of stakeholders. These efforts are intended to improve our ability to play a role in the support and advancement of women and the promotion of their rights and opportunities.

Commissioners

Nancy Rosenblum (Ashland, MA), Cathy Ashton (Wayland, MA), Ceylan Rowe (Northborough, MA), Jean Bertschmann (Hopkinton, MA), Stephanie Deeley (Framingham, MA), Heather Panahi (Wellesley, MA), Rachel Niemiec (Ashland, MA), Leslie Smart (Framingham, MA), Lindsey Galvao (Natick, MA)

Student Interns: Nicole Taylor, Rianna Mukherjee, Deirdre Belger

Officers Elected for 2019

Heather Panahi, Chair
Nancy Rosenblum, Vice-Chair
Stephanie Deeley, Vice-Chair
Jean Bertschmann, Secretary
Ceylan Rowe, Legislative Committee Head

Outgoing Members

Margareth Shepard
Sonia Sharma
Patricia Hohl

New Members

Lindsey Galvao
Leslie Smart
Rachel Niemiec

Overview/Summary of MWCSW Actions/Priorities

This year, the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women continued to actively work to improve and increase its visibility in order to better represent women and girls in the region. Moreover, we wanted to be more engaged in bringing awareness to some of the issues and pending legislation we and our constituents care most deeply about. To these ends, the commission hosted and/or participated in several local events this year:

Reproductive Justice Hearings: On November 6, 2019 and February 25, 2020 the MWCSW hosted two public hearings—the first was co-hosted by Senator Becca Rausch in Needham at the Needham Town Hall, and the second, co-hosted with Representatives Maria Robinson, Jack Lewis and Carmine Gentile, was held in Framingham, MA at the Main Branch of the Framingham Public Library. Both

events were open to the public and were focused on highlighting many of the reproductive justice-related issues that those who identify as women will face from adolescence to adulthood.

Each of the forums included a panel of community experts and activists with particular interest/focus. The panelists included:

- **Brandon Adams**, FSU Student and board member of the Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools Commission
- **Mehreen Butt**, Assoc. Director of Policy and Government Affairs for Planned Parenthood
- **Kim Comatas**, Lead Teacher at Partners in Sex Education
- **Lisa MacDonald**, Director of Equity Compliance at MassBay Community College and Title IX Coordinator/Affirmative Action Officer
- **Kate Sanetra-Butler**, Founder and Executive Director of Dignity Matters

In addition to the panelists, community organizations and women's support services were invited to host information tables and provided informational materials for attendee both prior to and after the panel discussion. Some of the groups who participated included: The League of Women's Voters (Framingham and Needham), REACH, Dignity Matters, Planned Parenthood, Women's Suffrage Centennial Celebration, representatives from the ROE Act Coalition, Voices Against Violence, RIA House and others.

The forums were widely publicized throughout the MetroWest area via print and social media. Both of the forums began with brief remarks by Commission Chair, Heather Panahi. In Framingham, Mayor Yvonne Spicer and Jack Lewis also offered remarks. At the Needham forum, Senator Rausch moderated, while Representative Maria Robinson moderated the Framingham event, with Representative Gentile offering closing remarks.

Both of the forums sought to advocate for the support and passage of several key pieces of legislation that have been high on our commission's priority list for some time:

- An Act Relative to Healthy Youth, S.263/ H.410
- An Act to Increase Access to Disposable Menstrual Products in Prisons, Homeless Shelters, and Public Schools, S.1274/H.1959
- An Act Relative to Sexual Violence on Higher Education Campuses, S.764/H.1209
- An Act Requiring Sexual Misconduct Climate Surveys at Institutions of Higher Education, S.736/H.1208
- An Act Advancing the Health of Pregnant Persons, S.1335
- An Act to Remove Obstacles and Expand Abortion Access, S.1209/H.3320 (ROE ACT)

Participants were encouraged to fill out legislative alert postcards, provided by the MWCSW, which were subsequently mailed to the appropriate legislators after the events.

Virtual Panel Discussion: Following Women's Advocacy Day, hosted by the State Commission, the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women hosted a virtual panel discussion on May 20,

2020 to continue the discussion about how Covid-19 is impacting women's support services and the populations they serve. Featured panelists included:

- Maureen Belger of *Dignity Matters*
- Colin Gallant, Health Center Manager for the *Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts (PPLM) Health Center* in Marlborough
- Patricia Hohl, Director at *Voices Against Violence* in Framingham and State Commissioner
- Marcy Ostrow, Intake Hotline Coordinator and Board Secretary for the Jane Fund
- Lucia Panichella is the Senior Director of Programs and Partnerships at *Jewish Family Service of MetroWest (JFS)*

The panel discussion had 30 participants in total and resources were shared electronically. Questions that were explored that evening included:

- Would each you comment on How Covid-19 and the subsequent 'stay-at-home' orders are impacting/affecting the populations that you serve?
- What obstacles are non-profit organizations like yours experiencing in the midst of this pandemic (i.e. outreach abilities, funding, access to resources, etc.)
- Recognizing that the pandemic has put much of the pending legislation on hold, what pieces of legislation would you like to remind constituents and legislators of and how can we support you in this?
- How can those in the MetroWest best support organizations like your own during this health crisis?

Representative Hannah Kane showed up for the event and was invited to speak. In addition, Susan Nicholls from Senate President Karen Spilka was in attendance, as were State Commissioners Audrey Hall, Patricia Hohl and Shaitia Spruell.

Girls' Virtual Listening Circle: As part of a state-wide effort to help the State Commission to launch its Girls' Initiative, the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women hosted a virtual girls' listening circle on May 28, 2020. The event, which was well attended (28 girls in total), was entirely moderated by our fabulous student interns—Nicole Taylor, Rianna Mukherjee and Deirdre Belger. The girls led an informative and productive discussion with young women aged 13-19 in an effort to better understand the obstacles and issues that young women have been facing as a result of Covid-19 and the subsequent consequences of 'stay at home' and social distancing measures. We are still working to compile a summary of findings, but central to the concerns of the girls who participated were issues of mental and emotional challenges and lack of support services as a result of schools being closed. Students also mentioned that some are limited in their access to wifi, making digital learning difficult, as well as food insecurity.

Public Testimony: In late April 2020, concerned about the safety, physical and mental well-being of female inmates at MCI-Framingham in light of the Covid-19 outbreak, the MWCSW submitted written testimony in support of House Bill 4652: An Act Regarding Decarceration and Covid-19. Additionally, we wrote a letter to Governor Baker calling on him to release all non-dangerous female prisoners—particularly the elderly and medically vulnerable women—who are at higher risk of Covid-19 infection. This letter was forwarded on to Senator Jamie Eldridge and Representative

Claire Cronin, Chairs of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary, as well as Senate President Karen Spilka and House Speaker Robert DeLeo.

Meetings: The MWCSW, due to the efforts of our Co-Vice Chair, Stephanie Deeley, was able to set up a conference call with Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan, to discuss our concerns about the treatment of inmates at MCI-Framingham as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Joining us on the call were also Representative Jack Lewis, Representative Maria Robinson and Mayor Yvonne Spicer. A follow-up call as arranged with Senate President Spilka's office as well. We are hopeful to soon be speaking with someone from the Department of Justice as we continue to advocated for female inmates in our region.

Voices Against Violence Purple Passion 5K Walk: On Saturday, September 21, 2019, members of the MWCSW Commission formed a team to walk in the annual *Voices Against Violence Purple Passion 5K Run/Walk* to raise awareness around domestic violence and sexual assault in Massachusetts. The event allowed commissioners to participate in an advocacy activity together, as well as to make connections and network with other organizations/agencies that are also committed to working on behalf of women and girls in the region.

Partnerships/Networking: We continue to work at growing our network of partners throughout the MetroWest region. With each event hosted, we are trying to get our name out there and offer our support to like-minded organizations. In particular, we feel confident in our growing relationships with Jewish Family Services, Dignity Matters and Planned Parenthood. Further, we are proud of the combined work we have been able to do with Mayor Yvonne Spicer and Representatives Jack Lewis, Maria Robinson and Carmine Gentile, who have proven to be strong partners in women's advocacy.

Goals for 2020-21

- To continue to boost the commission's visibility among the region's constituents, as well as other organizations focused on improving the lives of women and girls
- To organize and facilitate at least two public hearings in the next year
- Continue to invite community leaders to our monthly meetings to hear from them directly and strengthen our relationship with their organizations
- Continue to build our social media presence
- To host a regular girls' virtual meeting space to discuss and organize around issues and to share 'tips of the trade' regarding advocacy and activism, in order to empower our young sisters.
- To continue to 'grow' our book club, perhaps opening it up to members of the MW community
- To plan and host a Legislative Breakfast for the Spring of 2021

