

Commissioners Present: Marcia Merrill, Chair; Gretchen Bailey, Cary Brown, Carol Buchdahl, Laine Dunham, Susie Hudson, Anne McClaughy, Peg Martin, and Shambulia Gadsden-Sams.

Commissioners Absent: Eileen Boland, Ruth Finn, Cathy Frey, Jennie Gartner, Karen Henry, and Marion Milne.

Advisors Present: Sandy Bettis representing Central Vermont Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Lindy Hatcher representing Vermont Federation of Business Professional Women, Dr. Felicia Kornbluh representing Women's and Gender Studies Program at the University of Vermont, and Jenna Tofferi from Senator Leahy's Office.

Guests: Barry Chouinard, Linda Ingold, Rubin Jennings, and Greta Johnson.

Presiding: Marcia Merrill

Recording: Janet Bullard

Marcia called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m.

Announcements: Dr. Felicia Kornbluh, Director of Women and Gender Studies at UVM announced that they are partnering with Governor Madeleine Kunin to host a daylong conference on *The New Feminist Agenda: the Next Revolution for Women, Work and Family—Balancing a Career and a Family*. The keynote speaker is Joan Blades, co-founder of MomsRising.org and MoveOn.org. The conference runs from 9 a – 4 p at the Waterman Building on the UVM campus on Saturday, March 31st. Registration is required. (802-656-5665)

Marcia asked for feedback on moving the Commission's March 14th meeting to March 21st so that Commissioners and Advisors can attend the Women's History Month event – luncheon and panel discussion – sponsored by the Commission and the Vermont Historical Society – Women's History Project. The Commission would meet from 9:30 to 11:30; the luncheon and panel at noon. The meeting and luncheon will be held at the Unitarian Universalist Church on Main Street in Montpelier. After discussion, it was agreed that the date for the March meeting would be changed to March 21st.

Marcia introduced Barry Chouinard, owner of Comfort Colors by Chouinard in Northfield, Vermont. Barry has donated over 40 boxes of new 9 (slightly imperfect) t-shirts, sweatshirts and sweatpants to women inmates in the Chittenden Correctional Facility. Barry gave an overview of his company and said that his all-female quality control team has taken great pride in being able to help the women inmates with the clothing donations. He said that he is interested in talking more about how private public collaborations can be developed in order to make improvements at the facility.

Everyone gave Barry a round of applause and thanked him for his donation.

Minutes

Motion made by Peg Martin to approve the Minutes of the December 14, 2011 and January 11, 2012 Commission meetings. Seconded by Carol Buchdahl and voted unanimously.

Prison Parity Issues

Marcia introduced Rubin Jennings, Prison Rights Advocate from the Defender General's Office. Investigators go into the facilities to investigate complaints. Rubin stated that there have been a number of complaints and concerns from women at Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility. They have just worked out a process where investigators may now go into the units. A new protocol has also been developed between the Defender General's office and the Department of Corrections Commissioner/assistant commissioner for follow-up and feedback on specific complaints. Rubin noted that each facility is its own entity with rules, regulations. In response to a question about "worms in the drains" Rubin reviewed the history of insect larvae in the drains at Chittenden.

Women's Prison Visit: What did you see? What are our questions? What needs to change? What can VCW accomplish?

Commissioners shared their insights, questions, etc., about the prison visit:

- Absolute lack of activity, unless you can knit (with pencils) and crochet – tough way to fill up a day.
- Survey box has dust on top of it – that's where concerns/requests are put... not being attended to no one is paying attention to the inmates concerns.
- Loss of work programs is huge – many women already have high school diplomas, so Community High School isn't much benefit to most of them. Need to have some college classes going in the facility – what a waste of human potential.
- Limited or no phone calls with their children.
- Commissary prices are way too high.
- The inmates can borrow fourteen very old word processors in order to write letters, but they aren't very useful.
- An inmate's time in the facility can be extended for not knowing or understanding the various rules of the facility. What if an inmate began serving her time with the end of her term in sight, how would this change her stay? What if a staff person worked with an incoming inmate to develop a plan of action and explained the rules so that the inmate knows in advance what her stay might look like.
- Work and wage issues as well as issues of addiction and the need for rehabilitation.
- Challenging for women to deal with life when they get out, especially if they have had difficulty dealing with life before becoming incarcerated.
- Privatization of commissary and phone service, why?
- Lack of access to outdoors and lack of jobs and training opportunities and also lack of housing when inmates are released.

- Vermont has few sentencing guidelines and judges are free to make their own decisions based on facts and circumstances and how they feel about the case. Almost impossible for women inmates to comply with field supervision unit requirements (FSU) the way the system is set up currently. FSU requires that an inmate set up a schedule for each hour for the next week, including a call list, etc. There needs to be a support system for inmates on FSU.
- Also segregation issues among the inmates, each inmate is assigned to a unit and seems to spend all of her time with that unit – is this right?

Ideas for what VCW can do:

- Two-page memo outlining long and short-term concerns.
- Do our work in shoring up the facility, and work with a group to do an inmate handbook on how to navigate the system focusing on how women can come out of the facility whole and can stay that way. Work on the inside instead of imposing will from the outside.
- Writing for a Change Program has lost a lot of their attendees due to deepening depression caused by the living conditions. Should VCW help re-energize the program by suggesting that they work on an inmate handbook written by the inmates about how to do time successfully?

How do we want to proceed?

- Anne volunteered to work with Wendy on an inmate manual on “doing time.” Maybe Writing for a Change Program could be the editors. Work with the inmate who is an illustrator to design illustrations for the manual. Shambulia and Peg also volunteered to help with this. Diane Derby might be willing to participate in this group – Jenna will ask her and will let us know.
- Also look at contracts – commissary, phone, and health services. Janet volunteered to research the contracts.
- Look at life skills programs, job skills and release plans.
- Ongoing difficulty with child visits—especially from a distance.
- Plan to visit the facility at least twice a year.

Listening Forum Planning

Laine attended a meeting of the Maternal Child Health workers at the Bennington Department of Health. Laine reported that there is a high incidence teen pregnancy in Bennington County as well as substance abuse issues for pregnant and non-pregnant young women. The Maternal Child Health workers would like to co-sponsor a listening forum with the Commission sometime this fall. Lilly and Janet will work with Laine in planning the listening forum.

Legal Rights of Women in Vermont

Lilly brought a few additional polo shirts and rack cards. Lilly stated that press releases have been going out on a regular basis. There has been very positive feedback. Staff has been talking up the publication at every opportunity possible. Wendy was on the Mark Johnson show recently and will be on The :30 (WCAX-tv 3) and Vermont Edition in the near future. In the future, Lilly will be putting together a statewide classified ad program and a radio ad buy.

News

Lindy announced that she has a job offer on the table for director of the Lewis and Clark Foundation in Montana so this might be her last meeting. Everyone congratulated Lindy!

The meeting adjourned at 12:20 p.m.