

Commissioners Present: Marcia Merrill, Chair; Laine Akiyama, Gretchen Bailey, Eileen Boland, Carol Buchdahl, Ann Cardinal, Ruth Finn, Linda Fogg, Karen Henry, and Anne McLaughry.

Commissioners Absent: Sharon Baade, Cary Brown, Retta Dunlap, Cathy Frey, Marion Milne, and Vicky Young.

Advisors Present: Joanne Brooking representing Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Joanna Cole representing the Vermont League of Women Voters, Barbara Hannon representing Older Women's League, Lindy Hatcher representing Vermont Federation of Business and Professional Women, Linda Ingold representing Vermont Women's Business Center, Maggie Gendron from Senator Leahy's office, Jayne Sheridan representing Vermont Works for Women, and Carol Story representing Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains.

Staff: Janet Bullard, Wendy Love, and Lilly Talbert.

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

#### Welcome/Minutes

Marcia welcomed everyone to the meeting and said that we would do introductions later in the meeting as part of our discussion on women in the correctional system.

Motion made by Eileen Boland to approve the minutes of the January 13, 2010 meeting as submitted. Seconded by Carol Buchdahl and voted unanimously.

#### Commission Website Update

Lilly reported that the Commission's website has been updated. The new address is <http://women.vermont.gov>. The old address will continue to forward to this new address for a while. The content has been updated and the site changed to be more effective. Lilly encouraged everyone to go and check out the site and get any feedback to her.

#### Report – Rosalind Wiseman's January 26<sup>th</sup> Presentation

Carol Story reported that the Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains brought Rosalind Wiseman to Vermont and New Hampshire to give presentations on harassment and bullying. Ms. Wiseman is an internationally recognized author and educator on children, teens, parenting, education and social justice. Carol informed everyone that Rosalind spoke to about 85 guidance counselors, principals, and school personnel during the afternoon event and over 400 at St. Michael's College in the evening and about 120 in New Hampshire the next day. The commission did most of the coordination and all the outreach, publicity and registration for the afternoon event at the Essex Technical Center. Wendy noted that this was a very successful collaboration between the Girls Scouts and the Commission. Approximately 40 additional potential attendees were not permitted to register for the afternoon event.

because of capacity limits set by the Fire Marshall. They were directed to the evening event at St. Michaels.

### Women in Vermont Prisons – How to Proceed

Marcia asked everyone to introduce themselves and as part of their introduction answer the following question, “What do you think is the most important issue (for women in prison) and why?”

Issues mentioned were and by number of people in parenthesis:

- Kids (4) – really important to make sure that there is some reasonable way for kids to connect with parents and especially moms who are incarcerated – the kids are the victims.
- Health (2) – if the individual isn’t healthy and ready to be available to a child, the child will suffer. Physical health/mental health/emotional health and assessing and pointing the individual to services when that individual is under corrections care. Also economic/occupational health is important – literacy and job readiness skills. There needs to be coordination of all services in all communities.
- Housing (2) – availability of housing and housing security is really important one cannot rebuild their life until they are in a safe place.
- Expansion of Court diversion programs for nonviolent offenders
- Looking forward to a release date and watching it go by due to lack of housing
- Rehabilitation (5) - if the goal is to get rehabilitated then every decision ought to be made with that goal in mind. Make moms realize that as a mom they need to get their act together for their children. Give women the tools needed to succeed, change their behavior. Bring all nonviolent women offenders and their children together in a supportive/rehabilitative environment and teach life skills. Meet parent’s needs, most incarcerated women have committed a crime for economic reasons and kids learn from their parent’s experiences. Focus on mothers and rehabilitation. Every component should be addressed such as in Head Start programs. Goal would be to reunite mothers and children as soon as possible.
- Generational cycle – children need to have our attention and guidance in order to break the cycle.
- Recognize the complexity of issues facing incarcerated women and where there are programs that are working well find ways to enhance the collaboration between/among programs.
- Education is key give women an opportunity to see a different life. Poverty relates to educational level that in turn relates to incarceration.
- Employment (2) - support for employment opportunities while incarcerated and also for transitional jobs projects.

- Commission involvement in the working group looking at the issue of moving the women's population. Also look at alternatives to incarceration.
- Coordination of people and programs and review of obstacles faced by providers, what can we do to help? Prevention and treatment of mental health and substance abuse is key.
- Poverty is the biggest issue faced by many incarcerated women. Studies show that poverty relates to literacy.
- Programs and support that give women a chance to succeed on the outside.
- Complexity of incarcerated women's lives is very different from that of male inmates.
- Closing of communication loops, seems to be much needed and would be a service that would hopefully resolve some of these issues.

Marcia then summarized the big issues as follows: Children, Housing, Rehabilitation (alternatives to incarceration), Employment, and Health (physical/mental) and suggested that we divide the tasks into short-term and long-term.

The discussion then centered on the four bills currently before the legislature dealing with corrections issues. Wendy summarized the four bills:

**H.291** which proposes to establish a bill of rights for children of parents who are arrested or incarcerated.

**H.296** which proposes to require the court to consider the impact of sentencing on any children of the defendant; direct the commissioner of corrections to consider family connections when determining placement of an inmate; direct the department of corrections to ensure that minor children are cared for adequately when a person enters the correctional system; direct the commissioner of corrections to gather data regarding children of incarcerated parents; direct the commissioner of corrections to review and revise, as appropriate, department policies regarding contact between inmates and their children; and require various agencies involved in the criminal justice system to establish policies, guidelines, and procedures which require consideration of children at every step in the process of arresting and incarcerating parents.

**H.319** which proposes to authorize the commissioner of corrections to gather information about dependent children from a person committed to his or her custody.

**H.507** which proposes to modify permanent guardianship law for children to comply with new federal provisions and enable guardians to access federal funds for guardianships. H.507 has passed the House and is now in the Senate.

Commissioners voiced concerns about H.291 which proposes to establish a bill of rights for children of parents who are arrested or incarcerated because codifying rights can sometimes lead to issues down the line with rights that haven't been codified and could result in unnecessary legal action.

Motion made by Carol Buchdahl that the Commission support H.319 which proposes to authorize the commissioner of corrections to gather information about dependent children from a person committed to his or her custody and educate the Legislature that this is data that is needed and as such urge that the bill be passed. Seconded by Laine Akiyama and voted unanimously.

Jayne Sheridan then brought a short-term task to the Commission's attention she asked that the Commission have a seat at the table in the discussions about moving the women's population from Northwest State Correctional Facility to another facility, which is scheduled to happen in the next four weeks.

Motion made by Gretchen Bailey to have Wendy call the Commissioner of Corrections and talk to him how women's needs are being met as Corrections is being restructured. Seconded by Carol Buchdahl and voted unanimously.

Gretchen then offered a summary of the short-term tasks and stated that she had looked into the issue of shackling of women inmates and brought her research to the attention of the Department of Corrections. She continued by voicing the need for prenatal vitamins for pregnant inmates and agreed to look further into this issue – Wendy and Joanna Cole offered to help with this research. Anne McLaughry offered to find out why women don't have milk as an option at all their meals. Long-term issue is the phone list and communication barriers and what are the issue and what can be changed – Lilly volunteered to look into this.

#### Legislative Update

Wendy reviewed the list of bills of possible interest to the Commission. She reported that H.382 Paid Sick Days is hearing testimony tomorrow and that she will testify.

Eileen Boland, chair of the commission's education committee, updated the commission on the status of Harassment/Bullying bills before the legislature. Eileen distributed a handout detailing H.575 and H.691. She also noted that there is another bill H.648, which deals with harassment and hazing at independent colleges. Eileen said that she would have the Commission's Education committee further review these bills and report back to the full Commission.

Wendy continued her review with H.595 which proposes to improve the quality of childcare and early learning programs for Vermont's children and families by establishing a new model of collaboration between the state and childcare providers that recognizes the critical importance of early childhood educators in the delivery of high quality early childhood education. Marcia asked Eileen to have her committee review this bill further.

Announcements

Joanna Cole announced that there would be a Susan B. Anthony performance at the State House on Tuesday, February 16<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m.

Joanne Brooking mentioned that the film entitled, ***Beyond Conviction*** would be shown at the Kellogg Hubbard Library on Wednesday, February 17<sup>th</sup>. ***Beyond Conviction*** is a feature documentary that tells the story of three crime victims as they prepare to meet those that have committed these crimes.

Carol Story announced that Greg Mortenson, the author of *Three Cups of Tea* – the story of one man's mission to promote peace one school at a time, would be at Keene State College on March 5<sup>th</sup>.

Wendy circulated a picture of Joanna Cole's recent wedding.

Plus/Delta

What worked: feeling like we accomplished something, long thorough discussion and nailing down a to do list from that discussion, love longer go round, glad we're going on a tour of the Northwest State Correctional Facility, appreciate Marcia's firm but benign hand on the gear shift!, goodies were good! Appreciate depth and breadth of understanding the issues of incarcerated women.

What could be changed: nothing!

The meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.