

Commissioners Present: Marcia Merrill, Chair; Laine Akiyama, Gretchen Bailey, Eileen Boland, Cary Brown, Carol Buchdahl, Ann Cardinal, Ruth Finn, Linda Fogg, Cathy Frey, Karen Henry, Anne McClaughry, and Marion Milne.

Commissioners Absent: Sharon Baade, Retta Dunlap, and Vicky Young.

Advisory Council Members Present: 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, Sarah Kenney representing the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Barbara Saunders representing Building Bright Futures, and Carol Story representing the Girl Scouts of the Green and White Mountains.

Guest: Barbara Postman from Voices for Vermont's Children.

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

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m.

Minutes

Motion made by Carol Buchdahl to approve the minutes of the June 10, 2009 Commission Meeting as submitted. Seconded by Ruth Finn and voted unanimously.

Updates:

Harassment and Bullying – Eileen Boland, Chair of the Education Committee reported that she, Sharon, Retta, and Lilly met with the Commissioner of Education Armando Vilaseca and his legal counsel in July to discuss harassment and bullying issues, in particular some of the issues mentioned in the *Report of the Study Committee Harassment, Bullying and Cyber bullying of Students in Vermont Schools*.

Eileen stated that she felt that they came away from the meeting with the impression that Commissioner Vilaseca is more aware of the issues since he has been both a principal and a superintendent. She continued to report that the Department of Education would be submitting a federal grant proposal next month and that a large portion of that proposal would center around data collection, a big issue for the department currently. Eileen suggested that maybe the Commission write a letter of support for the grant proposal citing the need for accurate reliable data collection in order to better understand the extent of harassment and bullying that happens in our schools. Also, Eileen would like to have another discussion with Commissioner Vilaseca before the legislative session to see if there are any areas where the Commission could/should support efforts of the Department of Education.

Advisory Council Review - Ruth Finn, Chair of the Ad Hoc Task Force to review the advisory council guidelines reported that the task force met via conference call yesterday. Members present on the call were: Carol, Joanna, Tiffany, Jayne, Janet, Lilly, Wendy and she. Ruth stated that the task force made suggested several changes to the guidelines: (1) delete the requirement that advisors serve for two-year terms; (2) add that advisors attend Commission's scheduled business meetings *as appropriate*, and serve on a committee as a non-voting member *as needed* and (3) delete the language regarding individual members of the advisory council citing the fact that since the latest review of the guidelines five years ago this has never come up. A draft with the suggested revisions will be emailed to everyone as part of the mailing for the October Commission Meeting for action at the meeting.

Women's Prison Issues – Wendy reported that she, Lilly, and Janet visited the Northwest State Correctional Facility in St. Albans last month for a tour of this facility that now houses all incarcerated women. Previously the majority was housed at the Windsor Facility and a smaller number at the Dale Facility in Waterbury. Following the tour, staff attended an open meeting with inmates and Jill Evans, the Director of Women and Children's Programs to listen to their concerns.

In general inmates were pleased with many aspects of the new facility and programs. Women are now issued uniforms. Although they are generally pleased, there remain issues to be worked out. There are inadequate options for large size women and pregnant women and no tank tops for warmer weather. The major issue is that women are only issued three pairs of underpants per week. Although they may purchase additional pairs, many women do not have the funds to do so. Other issues of concern: limits on the conversations, in particular, topics that women can talk to their children about as well as the inability to interact with school personnel especially where there is a special needs child involved. And concern about 'wet' cells vs. 'dry' cells – a wet cell has a bathroom and some inmates don't want to use the toilet in front of their roommate and other women who are in dry cells who have limited access to bathrooms at night.

Biggest concern for inmates is lack of housing post incarceration. Many women remain in prison long past their release date because "approved" housing is unavailable. VCW staff are concerned about appropriate vocational opportunities and training for inmates especially for short timers and lack of access to computers to help with job searches, etc.

Other update- Lilly reported on the various projects that she has been working on over the summer:

The Commission's website is being updated and that a visitor counter is part of that update.

She is also exploring the Commission's presence on facebook, twitter and Wikipaedia.

Most recently, Lilly partnered with the Vermont Department of Health on a federal grant to train volunteers to help businesses implement the nursing moms in the workplace law. Forty volunteers participated in the training in June. Also she distributed a press release explaining the new law, which was picked up by the Associated Press and received good coverage.

The big summer project has been the rewrite of the Commission's publication, *The Legal Rights of Women in Vermont*, thanks to Vermont Law School (VLS) Professor Cheryl Hanna and several VLS students. This re-write is almost done and the next step is editing and proofing. Lilly reported that Louise Luring, Cary Brown, Gretchen Bailey and Ann Cardinal have all offered to help with the editing and proofing stage of this re-write. If others want to help, please let Lilly know.

Lastly she reported that the volume and urgency of intakes to our information and referral line has increased dramatically --- especially calls concerning housing.

Early Care and Education: Update on State Program Changes

Barbara Postman from Voices for Vermont's Children reported that Voices for Vermont's Children is part of a larger coalition, Kids are Priority One, working on early care and education. Barbara stated that the coalition has been travelling the state talking about child development and the fact that development of our children affects us all, not just parents.

She stated that she would discuss three topics today: Childcare subsidy proposed changes, Building Bright Futures, and Act 62 Preschool programs.

Childcare Subsidy Proposed Changes

Barbara reported that the proposed changes in the childcare subsidy program affects parents who are eligible for the subsidy, as well as the providers and the industry as a whole. The Childcare industry in itself is under resourced and attempts have been made to fill many of the gaps by creating stand-alone programs to address specific needs. The goal of the proposed changes is to merge the stand-alone programs into the newly proposed subsidy program and 'reset and recalibrate the entire system.' Subsidy eligibility guidelines are being updated to 2009 Federal Poverty Levels and the subsidy rate paid to providers is also being upgraded. Barbara stated that it looks like the proposed changes will benefit parents and most providers. Some providers who have been reserving spaces without maximizing the number of children they serve may lose some funds with the changes.

Building Bright Futures

Building Bright Futures is a public/private effort to develop an early care and education system. Building Bright Futures State Council was established via a Governor's Executive Order and is comprised of providers, business people, and various individuals who are interested and committed to early care and education. The goal of the council is to get legislation passed to create a non-profit organization in the state to make decisions on how early care and education is provided in the state. The new state council will be meeting this month to start working on developing legislation for the upcoming session. For more information, visit their website at www.buildingbrightfutures.org

Preschool Programs

Act 62 which passed in 2007 putting into statute a practice whereby school districts could contract with private providers or start their own preschool program for up to 10 hours per week as part of their schools budget, with funds coming from the education fund. Some school districts were able to implement programs and others reached the cap on the capacity that schools were allowed to include in their budgets. The cap has been confusing to school districts with an unintended consequence of schools declining to cancel preschool programs or not start them. Some legislators want to repeal the cap. Barbara cautioned that the most important thing is for us to know where our 3 and 4 year olds are and what educational opportunities exist for them.

Committee Time and Reports

Health, Safety and Civil Rights Committee

Carol Buchdahl, Committee Chair, reported that the committee talked about the safety and hygiene issues of incarcerated women and said that they want to work with other commission committees in reviewing these issues. The committee also discussed educational opportunities that exist around the increase of autoimmune disorders in women; treatment of the elderly in nursing homes; conflicts for refuge women in Vermont between cultural values and civil rights. The committee is also concerned about a possible H1N1 pandemic and the consequences for women and their children.

Economic Security Committee

Gretchen Bailey reported on behalf of the committee. The committee discussed paid sick days and the lack of information available to quantify this issue. The committee suggested that we invite the bill's sponsor to come to our November Commission meeting to provide some background on the bill. The committee also talked about economic issues of incarcerated women.

Education

Eileen Boland, Committee Chair, reported that the committee spent time today bringing their newest member Ann up to speed on the issues that the committee has worked on. They then discussed drafting a letter of support for the grant application for data systems that the Department of Education is submitting in hopes of implementing a better system of data collection, including statistics on harassment and bullying. The committee also talked about drafting a letter outlining the committees concerns and reiterating the recommendations in the *Report of the Study Committee Harassment, Bullying and Cyber bullying of Students in Vermont Schools*, and requesting a response before the legislature convenes so that we can support the department's efforts on these issues in the legislature. The Committee is also concerned about the educational opportunities or lack there of for incarcerated women.

Plus/Delta

What worked: information, committee work, good energy, and wonderful baked goods.

What didn't work: liked the introductions... but wanted a check in (especially after the summer!)

Meeting adjourned at 12:30p.m.