

**Vermont Commission on Women
Meeting Minutes**

Wednesday, March 8th, 2017

CAPS Training Center, Schulmaier Hall, 32 College Street, Montpelier, VT

Commissioners present:

Gretchen Bailey, Eileen Boland, Carol Buchdahl, Laine Dunham, Ruth Finn, Cathy Frey, Nancy LaVarnway, Melinda Moulton, Colin Ryan, Kerry Secrest

Commissioners absent:

Marcia Merrill (Chair), Lynn Batchelor, Charlotte Dennett, Danielle Martel, Jennie Gartner, Susie Hudson

Advisors present:

Robyn Freedner-Maguire of Let's Grow Kids
Wendy Rice of Vermont Works for Women

Guests: Suzi Wizowaty of Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform

Staff: Cary Brown, Hannah Myers, Lilly Talbert

Presiding: Carol Buchdahl

Recording: Hannah Myers

Meeting called to order at 9:32 a.m.

Welcome/Introductions

Carol welcomed everyone and asked them to introduce themselves.

Approval of February, 2017 Minutes

MOTION made by Laine, seconded by Ruth:

To approve the minutes as submitted.

MOTION APPROVED

We will next meet April 4th at the Pavilion on Equal Pay Day.

In a unanimous straw vote, which included all advisors present, attendees expressed preference for this meeting space at CAPS better than the meeting space at the Pavilion and people commented on the much-improved parking.

Equal Pay Compact – Kerry Secrest

Kerry announced that she has been working with Kelly Walsh on promoting the Equal Pay Compact (EPC) in Windham county. When Kerry is speaking at an event, she's giving 3 minutes to Kelly to pitch the EPC and pass out materials. Kerry asked Commissioners to think about where their circles or spheres of influence are to get the word out about the VT EPC, and then to follow-up by promoting the compact in those spheres.

Nancy added that she is including the EPC materials in the packets going out to businesses for the South Burlington High School Career Fair happening on April 4th.

Cary suggested that Commissioners contact Kelly Walsh to discuss how to promote the Compact or for support.

**Reducing Unnecessary Incarceration - “For the Sake of the Children” project – Suzi Wizowaty,
Executive Director of Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform**

Suzi introduced herself as a former legislator and mentioned that she used to do criminal justice reform work there in the legislature, but now heads Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform. The issues around incarcerated women have been issues the Vermont Commission on Women and the Women’s Legislative Caucus have been interested in for some time.

Suzi presented her specific proposal “For the Sake of the Children”, which is particularly for women who have minor children. The core members working on this proposal in addition to Suzi are Cary Brown of the Vermont Commission on Women, Pam Greene of Mercy Connections, and Karen Tronsgard-Scott of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

Suzi shared the following observations and thoughts with the Commission:

Vermont has resources such as restorative justice programs in every county, and pre-trial services programs, etc., which are helpful. Once you get involved in the criminal justice system it’s very difficult to succeed because you leave with all the disadvantages you had before, plus a criminal conviction. 95% of people in the system come from poverty.

Women’s pathways to criminality tend to be different than men’s. Women often end up in the criminal justice system through involvement with their criminal justice involved men. Over the last 30 years, we’ve seen a 300% increase in incarceration for men, and 1000% for women. She and her team went into the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility and spoke with women multiple times, as well as women who have left the system while developing this proposal.

Vermont’s pre-charge program will be stronger going forward, as it’s moved to the Attorney General’s office from the DOC. Getting rid of the issues surrounding incarceration for technical violations is a key component of this proposal. People can lose transitional housing, which can lead them back to jail. Furlough is difficult for most people. If you miss the bus and are late for an appointment, for example, you can get sanctioned. Community based programs could use additional support and expansion. VT does not have an adequate community based mental health system.

Bail reform, and the elimination of monetary bail is a priority issue. Monetary bail is only used for flight risks, violent offenders typically don’t get bail, as they are held for a risk to public safety.

There is movement in the country around changing the rules for parole. When parole boards look at the underlying crime in consideration of parole, it defeats the purpose. But that’s what is happening in practice. We should look at parole board makeup, and consider including a social worker and a previously incarcerated person.

Probation conditions of release are set by the court, and probation is generally instead of jail. Furlough can be one of 12 kinds, but people most frequently refer to re-integration furlough,

which folks are eligible for 6 months before they meet their minimum sentence. Furlough conditions are set by the DOC, and people on furlough generally can't do anything they can't do in prison – like drink alcohol. Parole is an early release program; conditions are set by the parole board. People don't frequently fail on parole.

Scandinavian countries, including Norway, have a different approach to criminal justice. Norway's most famous prison is on an island with no bars, inmates don't have locked rooms, they wear street clothes, they have productive work, and make their own meals with kitchen knives. People who have committed violent crimes are detained there. The average sentence for murder in Europe is 12-15 years, not life. The idea is, if we want people to change, learn skills, and be habilitated, etc., another system would be more effective. If we want people to be respectful, you treat them with respect. Non-violent women who may have drug and mental health problems don't need to be locked up, and in fact, that is not a setting where people can heal. A home like environment that allows children would be more beneficial.

Women are given harsher sentences than men for similar crimes. 1400 women go through the system in a year, although only about 150 women are in CRCF at a time. Asking women what they need is fundamental to this program.

Vermonters for Criminal Justice reform is proposing a three-year implementation program. The Women's Legislative Caucus is in support of this plan, and there is a bill pending to form a study committee to look at implementation.

Melinda added that families abandon women in prison much more frequently than they abandon men, and wondered if Vermont families could help respond and support women as they get out of prison.

Robyn wondered if there is a role for the foster care system in this proposal? Respite care can be quite helpful, and can be critical for stressed families.

Commissioners are welcome to contact Suzi with additional questions at:
wizowaty@vermontersforcriminaljusticereform.org

Outreach Committee Presentation - Colin Ryan

Colin gave a presentation about how to utilize social media to amplify the work of the Commission, focusing on Twitter and Facebook. He covered:

What is the voice of the VT Commission on Women?

- Nonpartisan
- Encouraging
- Bold
- Inclusive
- Stories Inspiring Change
- A Better World – What does it look like?

Twitter

Tweet = 140 Characters or less

Tagging, Hashtags, Giving Credit, retweeting, summarizing articles

Younger Audience

Facebook

Longer posts than Twitter.

Sharing posts, tagging, sharing events

Older Audience

Carol is exploring the possibility of getting a social media intern for the Outreach Committee.

Discussion of VCW action items

Legislative Update

Hannah gave the following legislative update:

Since we last met, Cary provided testimony (which is available on our website) on the following bills:

- H.136 - an act relating to accommodations for pregnant employees
 - Current law does not require employers to provide accommodations to employees experiencing a normal, healthy pregnancy, but who might need minor accommodations like the ability to sit, access to water, longer or more frequent breaks, etc.
- H.196 – an act relating to paid family leave
 - 100% wage replacement for 12 weeks, up to twice the VT livable wage.
- H.422 - an act relating to confiscation of dangerous or deadly weapons from a person arrested or cited for domestic assault
 - Law enforcement would confiscate weapons at the scene, and hold them for 5 days. They would be returned unless they are evidence or a further Court order to hold them (like an RFA, conditions of release, etc.) is issued.

The House has passed a few bills relating to sexual assault that we're watching:

- H.25 – an act relating to sexual assault survivors' rights
 - A Bill of Rights for Sexual Assault Survivors:
 - Right to forensic exam at no cost; and
 - Right to be informed at several stages, like a DNA profile match or rape kit destructions or disposal;
 - Right to confidentiality
 - Right to certain information about resources
- H.27 – an act relating to eliminating the statute of limitations on prosecutions for sexual assault
- H.74 - an act relating to nonconsensual sexual conduct
 - Creates a misdemeanor nonconsensual sexual conduct statute that filled a void created by a recent VT supreme court case about lesser included offenses.

Responses to Federal Policy

Cary asked about our role in responding to federal policy. Are there things at the federal level that are going to impact women in Vermont?

Nancy wondered if there a way to poll legislators on April 11th at the Card Room about this.

Carol suggested we could have more listening forums later in the year.

Announcements

Lilly reminded Commissioners that while we've moved our meeting to April 4th, we still have the Card Room at the State House on April 11th. We will be there from 8:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m., and Commissioners are urged to attend for any or all of this time to speak with legislators, lobbyists, and others about the work of the Commission.

Marcia's chair term is expiring in June, and we'll be taking nominations in April and May, and the election will take place at our June meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.