

Cary Brown: Tireless Champion of Women

by Susan Ritz

Cary Brown has been advocating for women's equality most of her life. "I actually started a women's lib group in second grade. The goal was to prove to the boys that we were just as good as they were!" Now as executive director of the Vermont Commission on Women (VCW), Brown continues to advocate for women's equality. Since taking the helm in 2012, Brown, her two staff members, and the 16 women volunteer commissioners have been actively getting out into communities across the state, educating and informing legislators, businesses, and citizens about equal rights for Vermont women.

"What I'm trying to do," explains Brown, "is get out a lot, make as many connections as possible, be part of as many coalitions as I can, and have the commission's activities be geographically diverse." This past year the commission celebrated its 50th anniversary (it's one of the few state commissions in continuous operation since President Kennedy called for their establishment in 1962).

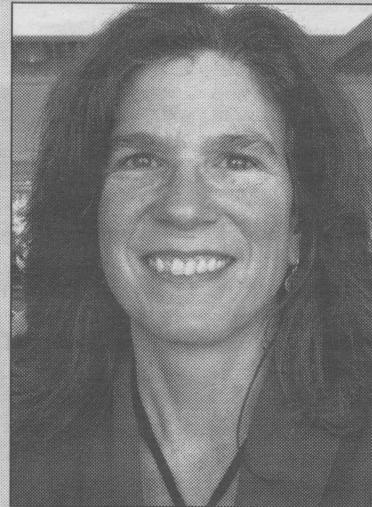
It was particularly busy with activities across the state from St. Albans to Springfield, focusing on incarceration issues, leadership training, and better support for working families. Brown also added six new partners to her ad-

visory Council, which brings together 23 groups, including such diverse organizations as the League of Women Voters, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, Women Business Owners Network, and the offices of Senators Leahy and Sanders and Representative Welch. These partners add significantly to the commission's reach and understanding of women's needs across the state.

Another way the commission connects with women and researchers is through its website. "We're the first stop for anyone looking for information about women in Vermont," Brown says. With thousands of hits a year, the website (www.women.vermont.gov) is the go-to source for women looking for help on a wide variety of issues. Its online publications include a 200 page resource directory of local and national organizations; the comprehensive *Legal Rights of Women in Vermont* handbook, which covers a wide range of issues including divorce, adoption, wills, public assistance, and much more; and a community calendar for women. The website and a referral hot-line, which fields over 100 calls annually, offer much needed assistance and information to women in need.

The women who reach out to VCW are often contending with multiple issues. "For example, we might get a call from someone about custody of her son, fear of losing her

job, and unsure about her rights as a nursing mother at work," explains Brown. "We help tease out their priorities and then make calls or refer them to the appropriate agencies for help." By keeping track of the calls



Cary Brown, Executive Director
of Vermont Commission on Women

and website requests, VCW is able to identify needs across the state. The website is also used by many people, both in and out of state, who are doing research on topics from domestic abuse to equal pay issues in Vermont.

This legislative session, says Brown, the commission will continue to focus on women's economic security. "Any legislation that impacts

economic security is important to us, like Reach Up cuts, because we know that women are overrepresented in low-income categories." This year's agenda includes sitting on the Governor's Council on Pathways from Poverty, advising legislators and businesses about paid or earned sick leave, and continuing to educate employees on the right to request flexible working arrangements as stipulated by the equal pay law the commission helped pass (in effect since January 1, 2014). Brown will also be working closely with the Women's Legislative Caucus on follow-up to the Summit on Women in Corrections, held September 30 at Vermont Law School and largely organized by VCW.

In addition, the VCW is now part of a brand-new collaboration with the Vermont Women's Fund and Vermont Works for Women focusing on the economic futures of Vermont women and girls. The coalition will be trying to find ways to open up opportunities and remove economic barriers that keep Vermont women and girls from fully participating in and enhancing Vermont's economy.

As a wife and mother of two sons, Brown knows what it takes for women, and increasingly men, to juggle family and work. She and the commission are working hard to make sure women get their best shot at self-sufficiency and economic equality, something that benefits all Vermonters.