

**Vermont Commission on Women Meeting Minutes**  
**Friday, November 17, 2023 | 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.**  
**North Country Career Center, Room #380, 209 Veterans Ave, Newport, VT**

**Commissioners present:**

In-person: Esther Charlestin (co-chair), Sarah Mell (co-chair), Hazel Brewster, Kellie Campbell, Alex Hilliard, Nancy Kaplan, Sophia Rabe.

**Commissioners absent:**

Heather Bouchey, Annie Mackin, Ashley Messier, Kiah Morris, Kelly-Rue Riso, Linda Joy Sullivan.

Remotely: Brenda Churchill, Wendy Knight, Susan Sussman

**Advisors present:** Remotely: Margaret Overman, Vermont Works for Women

**Guests:** Amelia Damato, Junior at North Country Union High School

**Staff:** In-person: Cary Brown and Karen Cygnarowicz; Remotely: Ellie Lane

**Presiding:** Esther Charlestin & Sarah Mell

**Recording:** Ellie Lane

### **1. Call to order and approval of agenda**

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Meeting called to order at 10:07 a.m.

**Meeting Agenda Approval Process:**

**MOTION** made by Nancy and seconded by Kellie

To approve the proposed amended meeting agenda, giving discretion to the chair to deviate from the agenda as necessary.

**MOTION APPROVED.** Agenda adopted.

### **2. Welcome/Introductions**

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Sarah and Esther welcomed everyone and asked them to introduce themselves.

### **3. Approval of October 20, 2023 Meeting Minutes**

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**Approval of October 2023 Minutes**

**MOTION** made by Hazel, seconded by Nancy:

To approve the October 2023 minutes as submitted.

**MOTION APPROVED.** Minutes adopted.

### **4. Welcome & Introductions**

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Sarah acknowledged that as a white person co-chairing with a Black woman, they can take up too much space, and at the last meeting they didn't find a great balance. They are committed to doing better.

Sarah also named that they noticed people looking at them visibly when it was time to transition or make a decision and challenged everyone to consider who they assume to have power and to be aware of this dynamic.

Kellie wanted to also share that she's noticed that this can be an intimidating room to walk into. She encountered while doing outreach, a presumption that this is a group of highly educated, well-spoken, powerful people with prestige and wants to reflect on how we communicate that this space is open to everyone. Susan wondered if there is a way to communicate that some people speak from their heads and others from their hearts and both are welcome.

## **5. Committee Discussions**

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### **Health Equity**

Nancy is the chair of the Health Equity Committee this year. She acknowledged that everyone has a different view of what health equity is and what the work is.

Sarah shared that last year, a group advocating for legislation to authorize Freestanding Birth Centers told us they would like our support on that, and shared information with the Committee. The Committee did some outreach to NEK communities to come to the public forum later. They also talked about the period product mandate at schools and how we've heard that not all schools have implemented this. They are in communication with Emma from Not a Luxury and talked about connecting with student groups to help get the word out.

Cary talked briefly about VCW procedure for deciding what issues we take up. We also could adopt a policy or just take a vote on whether this is something we want to take a vote on.

### **Housing & Caregiving**

Sophia shared an update about the Housing & Caregiving committee, and they are hoping to come back and choose one topic to focus on for the year. They discussed paid family leave and the current state of the motel program and talked a little bit about Habitat for Humanity and their success. Sophia, Ashley, Esther, and Heather are members. Susan is interested in joining this committee.

Kellie offered that she was invited by Morgan Crossman to the accountability matrix for Act 76, which is the big child care bill that recently passed. Kellie is happy to continue to participate there but also wanted to open that to other Commissioners. Kellie also shared that the NEK on Aging was very interested in our work as well.

### **Workplace Equity**

Kellie, Brenda, and Wendy

Kellie talked about continuing the Equal Pay Compact work and working on outreach; the group last year found that the contact information was outdated, and some people didn't know they were signers.

Nancy suggested that maybe we could offer a way for people to send something in to be read at a public forum or alternatives for communication.

Commissioners talked about creating a survey and also checked in about staff capacity.

Kellie asked about the Change The Story data collection piece and where that lives. Cary will follow up on that. Susan is also interested in working on data collection and reporting.

Margaret shared that a student group reached out to VWW about the wage gap and a project they are working on.

## **6. Operationalizing racial equity**

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Sarah asked about what folks are doing or practicing in committees that might be useful for the rest of us to know about, and how we might bring forward the brainstorm ideas from June into practice.

There was a discussion about the appointment and reappointment process and offered that reappointment is an opportunity to be more thoughtful about that process. The group talked about how long people have stayed on the Commission historically. An idea was shared about having some kind of informal review process at the end of a term. Alex suggested a life-cycle overview for a four-year term. Sarah said this could be a useful recruitment tool, and would demystify the Commission and make it feel more accessible.

The idea of asking the legislature to change the name of VCW to the Vermont Commission on Gender Equity was brought up. Esther suggested putting this on a future agenda to really discuss and explore.

Sarah and Esther asked the Committees to use the SOV Policy and Budget Impact Assessment Tool that Cary sent to everyone. Cary can send the version we created for the child marriage policy discussion and consider creating a streamlined example.

## **7. Staff, Commissioner, Advisor updates**

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We are working on public education on a fact sheet in collaboration with the Human Rights Commission, and have been updating the Workplaces for All website to match the new law and also make it more robust.

Cary went to a summit about the new [Age Strong Vermont Roadmap](#).

Office on Racial Equity held a conference and Cary, Sarah, and Alex attended. One of Cary's takeaways was about the State's language access plan, and we've been talking about this at VCW for a number of years. This year we were able to include some funds for translation in our FY25 budget.

Cary announced two new Commissioners, Linda Joy Sullivan, Mayor of Newport and former legislator, and Kelly-Rue Riso, Chief Human Resources Officer at Central Vermont Home Health & Hospice.

Karen thanked everyone for coming to Newport and working on the outreach and communications. Karen is looking forward to the next public forum that's all virtual, and also to the next in-person forum in April, and welcomes feedback.

Margaret visited a Healthy Masculinity class and is thinking about how to tie that into the workplace in their Gear Exchange. VWW is restarting a youth advisory connection.

## **8. Public Forum**

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Remotely: Mary Hoadley, for the North Country Hospital, and Pastor at Brownington Village Congregational Church

In-person: Amelia Damato, Sarah Corrow, Barbara Morrow, Sue Davis, Donna Constantineau

Esther opened the floor to the public members.

The discussion included the following topics:

We have a huge housing problem up here. I would love to see the Commission get involved; this is a women and families problem. It keeps getting cross-pollinated with issues about mental health and substance use. The issue is that there is not enough housing and what is available is below grade. It's very hard to get developers to step up to the plate and get statewide attention in the upper half of the kingdom. It's more serious than what the statistics portray, and in this high school there is an amazing program that works closely with families that are unhoused and they are seeing a lot of concerns.

We also need to be concerned about the elderly's ability to heat their houses this winter. We have transportation, childcare, and benefits cliff issues. Women up here don't work because they lose their benefits.

The same issues exist up here but to the tenth power because of the increased poverty. Domestic violence and housing issues intersect and women can't get custody of their children because they don't have housing, transportation, etc. We need a more flexible system.

Families are having to find arrangements for their children because they have no warm place to go. We have a lack of medical services up here. A 78-year-old friend who has had cancer several times. She has a small apartment. She recently discovered that her spousal maintenance was taken away by Medicaid because her ex-husband is in a nursing home. She's selling her household items to pay the bills.

Burlington has a comprehensive guide for survivors but would love to see something like that for the Kingdom, something online.

People don't know what resources are available to them. It would be great if we had a place for people to learn life skills like cooking, and shopping on a budget. Also brought up concerns

about 3Squares not covering hot prepared foods and how challenging this is for people who are not housed.

This community needs connection. We need to find ways to connect with people in safe and soft ways. One thing we've done well in the NEK is food. We can help with that. Housing is really hard to sustain. We need small steps of action in a way that's kind.

Newport is a hub for Orleans and northern Essex counties. We need better communication between community organizations in this corner of the state. Internet is a barrier, as is cell service.

Talked about Joshua House which offers crisis financial assistance.

There are not a lot of opportunities for women to gather, there is isolation. There is a lot of resistance to new programs because the community has been let down a lot in the past. EB5 was cited as an example, and the hole in downtown Newport, in addition to a lot of people who did work and didn't get paid. Getting trust is hard, and the community is sick of being lied to.

Mary mentioned that during COVID there was a lot more support about food access and outreach and there was a lot of money for that. The Everyone Eats program was powerful, but we've lost that. Senior meal sites didn't all come back. Volunteers are older and we need younger energy. We do a lot of talking without action and we lose momentum and people get angry. Schools are doing a great job with afterschool programs. We don't have adequate child care. What we haven't done is figure out how to hear from everyone. There is a large community in the NEK who are never going to think these meetings are for them. We have a mental health crisis and a lot of gun violence. We aren't looking at the underlying causes of substance abuse. We aren't a soft place to land and it's getting harder to exist here. People are generous here with their time and energy.

HomeShare Vermont program, perhaps a program like that up here could be helpful.

Talked about housing help requirements and how we can get support for towns, thinking about municipal buildings overnight, how we could offer overnight shelter. We need to try.

Esther thanked everyone for sharing where you are right now, and what you need. We have a lot to think about here to consider how to support you.

**Meeting Adjourned at 1:02 p.m.**