



Vermont Commission on Women Meeting Minutes

May 14th, 2014
Pavilion Office Building, 4th floor conference room
Montpelier, VT

Commissioners present:

Marcia Merrill (Chair), Eileen Boland,
Carol Buchdahl, Gretchen Bailey,
Dr. Felicia Kornbluh Charlotte Dennett
Ruth Finn, Danielle Martel, Cathy Frey,
Nancy LaVarnway, Marion Milne

Commissioners absent:

Susie Hudson, Jennie Gartner,
Shambulia Gadsden Sams,
Laine Dunham, Ariel Wengroff

Advisors present: Kim Swartz representing the Vermont Department of Health, Sarah Kenney representing the Network for Domestic and Sexual Violence

Guests: Aimee Pope (VCW Budget Analyst), Trudy Trombley (store owner in Stowe), Chris Curtis (Vermont Legal Aid), Representative Suzi Wizowaty.

Staff: Cary Brown, Lilly Talbert, Claire Greene

Presiding: Marcia Merrill

Recording: Claire Greene

AGENDA ITEMS

Welcome/Introductions

Marcia welcomed everyone and those present to introduce themselves.

Approval April 2014 minutes

MOTION made by Carol Buchdahl, seconded by Eileen Boland:

To approve the minutes as submitted.

MOTION APPROVED

Women in Corrections

Representative Suzi Wizowaty gave a brief overview of her involvement with issues concerning women in corrections around the state. Suzi is the Director of Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform, an organization working for a more restorative criminal justice response by limiting incarceration and redirecting spending to things such as job training and education. Suzi was asked to provide ways the commission could better benefit women in corrections through legislative channels, and the commissioners discussed a number of ideas. Some ideas offered during the discussion were:

- To keep in mind the basic framework of how women get involved in the criminal justice system and they ways they differ from men.
- Main issues for formerly incarcerated women returning to their communities are:
 - Finding safe housing.
 - Employment barriers: many women re-entering the workforce did not have strong employment history (or any) prior to incarceration.
 - Reunification with kids: Vermont has a very high rate of Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) compared to the rest of the country, especially for infants. TPR data could be an important issue for the Commission to take on and investigate further.

- *Justice Home* in Brooklyn is an example of a case management based system where criminal justice involved mothers can stay home with their children. A similar local program is Vermont Parent Representation Center (VPRC), a resource for women who are at risk of losing their children. VPRC's intervention team model—including an attorney, a social worker, and a peer navigator (a parent who has had direct experience with the child protection/foster care system) — is intended to support parents at risk of losing their children to state custody. Specifically, VPRC works with parents to address the issues that threaten their children's safety in order to help them become stronger providers. Suzi says these preventive/support based programs can be more cost effective than incarceration and help women lead more successful lives with their children.
- Encourage sentencing non-violent women with home detention when possible.
- S.295, otherwise known as the pretrial services program, diverts repeat offenders into pretrial services. This bill was not specifically directed at women, but they especially benefit from this bill because it supports the idea that mental health disabilities and drug addiction are not crimes. This bill ultimately recognizes that it is often the effects of trauma on women that pave their path to criminal activity.
- Questions reemerged from a previous meeting around the reported bias in the courts to “protect women from themselves.” The Commission’s only verification of paternalism in the judiciary has been anecdotal, not quantitative. The last research done on gender bias in the courts was in 1991 by the VT Bar Association. Suzi recommends contacting:
 - Cindy Walcott, from the Family Services at Department of Children and Family services, to verify some of the parental and family data
 - Ann Pugh, chair of the Human Services Committee, to see if they will take this up as a legislative priority
 - Monica Weeber @ VTDOC for the most current data
- Gather adequate data to be presented at a Summit on Corrections this summer, to be organized by a partnership of VCW, the Women’s Caucus of the legislature, and Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform. Suzi addressed the importance of qualitative storytelling data in moving towards restorative justice policy.
- Consider creating a simple one page document for the legislature addressing VCW’s incarceration concerns.

Commissioners and advisors who would like to be part of the Women in Corrections Summit should contact Cary. Lastly, VCW is still waiting on grant to move forward with “in house” research efforts. In the meantime, staff will figure out what data is currently being collected to avoid reinventing the wheel. The commission was advised to be clear on what data is needed (objectives, goals, etc.) before approaching DOC. Some Commissioners would like to remain open to seeing what is out there so as not to get boxed into certain assumed outcomes and trends.

Legislative Outcomes

Cary introduced Chris Curtis, co-chair of the Governor’s Council on Pathways from Poverty. Chris began by thanking the Commission for their efforts from last year which set the stage for many gains during this year’s legislature. Such efforts helped to create a clean slate for the summer interim period where anti-poverty advocates and the Governor were able to work together to create the Pathways from Poverty group, and ultimately, a strong and successful legislative agenda. Some new funding highlights from the 2013/2014 session were:

- \$2.5 million from the state and \$4 million from the federal government
- Doubling Vermont’s rental subsidy

- \$300,000 for emergency shelter, backsets the sequester defunding
- \$800,000 for Early Education
- \$600,000 to increase number of substance abuse and mental health counselors around the state to help reduce the caseloads of current, overburdened providers.
- Many of these funding levels will be matched with federal grants.

Chris noted that this is the biggest legislative investment in reducing poverty that Vermont has seen in a long time.

- H.620, the second bill discussed, involved legislation intended to alter the Three Squares VT (food stamps) overpayment obligation for families. While the initial bill pushed for the state to cover the entire tab, the legislature could only acquire enough federal funding to cover 50% of these payments. Secondly, this bill will raise the threshold of waived payments from \$400 or less to \$600 or less. The State error rates in the food stamp program have dropped this year to around 4% (out of range from sanctions). Chris emphasized that there is a renewed focus on keeping these errors rates under control.
- The former Homeless Vermonters “hotel program” bill required applicants to pay half of their income to their housing which forced participants to exhaust all their resources on shelter. New legislation reduces that amount to **no more than 30%** and follows the “normal housing to income ratio”. Chris highlighted how the wording of this bill leaves room for organizations like Legal Aid to allow certain families to pay 0%.
- Reach Up Bill will increase how much people can save and how much people can earn while keeping their benefits. Additionally, reach-up “leavers” can apply to receive a childcare subsidy. Modest reduction in reach ahead to a flat 50 dollars for the entire 12 months. Overall, Chris believes this is a reasonable shifting of funding.

Sarah Kenney, Associate Director of Public Policy at the Vermont Network against Sexual and Domestic Violence, recapped two bills and three initiatives with domestic violence impacts which passed this year:

- H.735, a firearms storage bill, just passed last Friday night. The legislation contained a section outlining a new system with storage options for the firearms that people subject to an order of protection are required to temporarily relinquish. The bill was strongly supported by the Vermont Federation of Sportsmen’s Club (VTFSC) who ended up being instrumental in moving the legislation along. The Network is still feeling pressure from Gun Owners of Vermont who are unhappy with the outcome. Sarah attributes much of the bill’s success to the highly involved family members Rhonda Grey, a domestic violence abuse victim.
- H.88, a bill related to parental rights and responsibilities involving a child conceived as a result of a sexual assault, became more contentious than anticipated and ended up coming out of the legislature with some compromise. Even when there are no formal sexual assault charges, women in Vermont can now petition the court for sole custody of child and no contact with perpetrator.
- Lastly, Sarah recapped a bill relating the adoption of impartial law enforcement practices (bias-free policing) which are intended to reduce false identifications during custodial interrogation. On or before September, 2014, (and annually thereafter) every state, local, county, and municipal law enforcement agency, must report on whether the agency has adopted a bias-free policing policy. Law enforcement agencies will also be working with the Vermont Criminal Justice Training Council to begin collecting uniform roadside stop data. The intent of collecting this police “perceived” data is to track and end any bias happening with individual officers.

Advisory Council Discussion

VCW staff is in the process of brainstorming ways to strengthen the VCW Advisory Council for both the commissioners and advisors with the goal of creating a more effective relationship. The idea of adding new organizations whose mission aligns strongly with VCW was also brought forth.

One proposed way to encourage greater participation is to have special meetings that are specifically focused on Advisory Council members. This would offer the opportunity to network, combine efforts, and establish priorities for the coming year. Other Commissioner suggestions were:

- Not to have the Advisory Council attend regular business meetings, but create unique meetings that cater to their participation and enhance VCW as a whole.
- Commissioners support the idea of an advisory focused legislative meeting that is warned well in advance and mission driven.
- Distribute advisory survey before this meeting for members to outline their objectives and goals.
- Better use of technology to boost participation for those advisors who are geographically far away and/or are underfunded. Such efforts might create less guilt and stress amongst members.
- Create a wider cadre of individuals whose knowledge base and expertise VCW can call upon for help with the priority issues of that year.
- Overall, positive support for the legislative meeting in the fall.

Cary recommended a committee of commissioners to finalize a proposal that could be voted on in June. Felicia and Carol both volunteered. Some organizations that commissioners suggested serve on the Council are: Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, Vermont Women's fund, Vermont Legal Aid, Hunger Free Vermont, Women's Business Owners Network, Vermont Women in Higher Education, Vermont Women in Law Enforcement, IBM Women Engineers Caucus (headed by Leslie Griffith), UVM Women's Caucus, Regional Women's Consortium. All other ideas should be submitted to Cary.

Staff Updates, Legislative Luncheon, 50th Anniversary Events

A list of summer work compiled by VCW staff was passed out and briefly reviewed. Cary requested a legislative luncheon commissioner committee to track and secure donations. Claire will be the main staff organizer of this event.

The next 50th anniversary event is at CCV in Springfield on June 11th. This event will include the president and dean of students at CCV, local legislators, and women in high level positions around the area. Discussions will center on female leadership and what women need to succeed as students in higher education.

The three VCW interns for this summer are:

- Alex Stetter, student at Montpelier High School, will be helping Claire with 50th anniversary clean-up
- Casey Lussier, a Vermont Law graduate student, will be updating the Legal Rights of Women in Vermont
- Emily Myers, double major in political Science and classics at Union College, will be around the office completing various tasks.

Announcements

Felicia is currently trying to navigate budget challenges with the UVM Women's and Gender Studies Program. She is seeking suggestions from the Commission and UVM affiliates on effective ways to handle this situation.

Eileen will be sending three articles to share with the Commission.

Meeting adjourned at 12:33 p.m.