

**Bennington Listening Forum Notes**  
**Wednesday, Sept. 12 2012**  
**1-3 at the First Baptist Church, Bennington**

Marcia Merrill, VCW Chair opened the forum at 1:07.

Attendance: 84 community members

Marcia spoke about the forum's goal: to provide an opportunity for Vermonters to speak about successful support systems, challenges and concerns about the conditions for young women in Bennington County, and to have the people who can effect change present to listen. She thanked our community partner organization, the Bennington County Maternal Child Health (MCH) Coalition, and introduced Debby Dutcher, the Maternal Child Health Coordinator at the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) to speak about this local organization's work.

Debby welcomed and thanked everyone for attending the Listening Forum. She explained the MCH Coalition is made up of various community partners, VDH, Southwestern Vermont Medical Center Women's/Children's Staff, Children Integrated Services and other community partners. Their mission is to work together to promote health and provide support for pregnant women, new mothers and their families in Bennington County. That is why we are here today. Debby asked that the members present stand. Debby thanked agency and organization partners and the young women and men of Bennington County for support, for speaking out, and being heard.

Marcia provided some background on VCW and its listening forums. The Commission has held forums for specific "communities": inmates in the women's correctional facility, small business owners, older women, high school girls...and forums for broader audiences. Sometimes we are invited by community members to address specific needs, and sometimes the inspiration is more free form: to gather, listen, and understand more about the lives of women and girls in Vermont. Often the most long-lasting impact of our forums is to strengthen networking between community members, service providers and policymakers. Marcia spoke about how VCW uses information from the forums to shape our work and direct our resources, and introduced Carol Buchdahl, a VCW Commissioner from Saxtons River as the event moderator.

Carol welcomed everyone and thanked them for taking the time to attend. She then asked the commissioner panelists to introduce themselves. She set the context for audience participation, explaining that the listening forum was to help shape and strengthen the work of service providers in the community to best serve young women. She explained that it was everyone's job to speak to their experience, and that it was our job to listen.

Carol said that notes from the forum, once approved by the commission, would be on our website ([www.women.vermont.gov](http://www.women.vermont.gov)). Unless an audience member was representing an organization, was a legislator, they would not be identified by name in the notes. This event was not being videotaped, or recorded, and to our knowledge, there were no reporters present at the event.

Audience members were asked to think of this as a town hall type event, to raise their hands, and to use the mike provided.

She requested that the young women in the audience think of themselves as the heroes of their own story and asked them to reflect on what has made them a success. She requested that the young

women speak first.

The young women responded (identifiers have been removed from comments, unless speaker was adult):

High school student: Moving made her a better person. Teachers who care.

Elementary/Middle school student: Member of a large family and mornings are difficult. Empathetic teachers make a difference when you're having a bad day.

Moved here for high school. Realized how hard it is for working parents.

Katrina Hollis with Teens for Change program of United Counseling Services: was an at-risk youth. Spoke about attending alternative HS as a young mom. Son is now 4. Has become strong youth leader – owes success to all services provided through community. Most important for her success: getting an education, the Sunrise program, peer support, and hard work.

High school student: Was super socially anxious/awkward. Went to Germany through school summer program...grew out of anxieties and can now speak in front of people. Teacher modeled good social skills, and gave lots of individual attention. Made friends with people who I didn't know.

Student: Very shy, thick shell, not open. Project Leap offered <http://www.quantumleapvt.org/projects.html> – after school activities...got into plays in school, allowed her to get involved in different things.

Carol asked groups of 5 to form and come up with **2 things most helpful to success:**

Summary of group reports:

Relationships – details: with trust; Someone to help you; To be able to talk; Nonjudgmental support; Great support system – family/friend/teacher, Confidant who can help you sort out your issues, My mom, I can talk to her about anything; Caring about each other as equals; the presence of someone who listens and treats you like what you say is important; respect; My sister – someone who has been through what I'm going through; and objective party

Privacy – not having interference when making own decision

Alternative programs to regular high school

Putting your happiness first and foremost

Access to mental health and insurance coverage

Afterschool programs, like a Theater program - so important (and somewhat likely to be cut)

Positive role model

A goal or something to look forward to

Positive connection with community

Life skills support after high school

An awareness of Community resources

Faith in self, others, and a higher power

Teens are not all as terrible as we are made out to be!

Refuse to Use important program (<http://thecollaborative.us/refuse-to-use/>) - Refuse to Use was developed by Stratton Mountain Resort and The Collaborative to support community schools with individual substance use prevention programs. Students in RTU begin by taking a pledge to remain free from drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Parents, guardians or caring adults pledge to support the students.)

Carol then gathered groups of 5. They had 6 minutes to reply to this question: **What are the obstacles for you to reach that list of helpful items?**

Summary of group reports:

Transportation: Kids need to ride buses to get home, prevents them from participating in after school activities; Brother has to take 2 buses to get to school; Services for people in Manchester are in Bennington, and you can't get there easily and that makes it difficult to have confidential help. How about a bus or a shuttle service?; Sometimes students must wait to get a ride or for a program to start.

Poverty: transportation; lack of sports equipment; needing to work! Cycle of family poverty

Pressures to conform: Social hierarchy in school – complicated

Family dynamics

Bullying and cyber bullying

Domestic violence – controlling behaviors in relationships – gets in way of setting and reaching goals

Vermont's culture – so small

Losing self -respect and self confidence

Trustworthy people are hard to find; and often lost

Special needs kids aren't part of soccer or other sports

Need true sense of purpose that is greater than themselves – about who they are uniquely and their value; Lack of goal setting

Peers tell you that you can't do it...

Middle schoolers have confusion about who they can talk to confidentially

Guidance – focus needed also on students not planning to attend college; Making choices for college major – help with goal setting and best fit for individuals

Victims of situational living and growing up too fast; lack of play, lack of lightness

Lack of fellowship in 20's – difficult to find opportunities that are nearby without having to drive an hour – art, sports, etc..

Very little safe and affordable housing for young moms...they are often forced to rely on others to care for them. Hard to think of your future when you're homeless or dependent on others

Glee (popular TV show: <http://www.fox.com/glee/>) is all about gathering people together...there should be a place using technology to make friends, a safe place

Carol split up the audience into 1/2 adults and 1/2 youth.

### **Youth were to develop a list of personal needs and draw the perfect community.**

Group A-Personal needs: Drew a heart (love) and peace sign and a helping hand. Perfect community description included the words: respect, love, positivity, (group was later asked for clarification – Positivity means staying happy and staying strong helpfulness, trust, understanding, support, open mindedness, individuality, looking good, being a mom, loving somebody, working being ourselves responsible.

Group B -Personal needs: education, responsibility, accepting change, open minded, gaining experience, family. Community description: pictures included affordable housing, high school diploma, mother and child, three figures speaking with love and a title of QLC

Group C-Personal needs: Believe goal, respect, motivation, keeping positive, keeping on task, taking risks, standing out, making a difference. Community: drew a structure titled “finding where you belong”. The roof was middle school, with the words navigating through, staying organized, Bullying, puberty. The floor was high school, with the words CDC, clubs, being yourself, what you wanna do after high school, staying true to who you are, learning from your mistakes. Also drew another structure titled After High school, included the words, coming together and no judgment. There was a road between these two structures.

Group D-Personal needs: non-judgmental personality, people person, values, ideas, morals, intuition, individuality. Perfect community description: blocks connected with the words friends, home, family. Pictures of buildings marked, Planned Parenthood, free health care, AA/NA, Therapy, Good Will, Vocational School, School diversity, public transportation, religious confession, on religious confession.

Group E-Personal needs: self-confidence, relationship with trusting person, someone to just listen and not advise. Perfect community description: an open door, a welcoming person, a compass

### **Adults were tasked with the question: How can we help you and support you and remove barriers?**

Volunteers after school to create safe space for kids

Money for programs

Unstructured time to hang out with kids and adults – kid's days are too structured

Extend the school day.

Stop teaching to the test

Create a helping safe “warm” place for kids with adults that provides unstructured time – games, music, talk, coffee. Kids hang out at McDonalds – unhealthy! Recreation center costs money – kids can't afford it. Boys and Girls club needs to do a public information campaign – the community needs to hear about the benefits of having a club

Carol thanked all who participated and closed the forum at 3:00.