

**Vermont Commission on Women
Meeting Minutes**

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

Pavilion Office Building, 4th floor conference room, 109 State Street, Montpelier, VT

Commissioners present:

Marcia Merrill (Chair), Gretchen Bailey, Eileen Boland, Carol Buchdahl, Laine Dunham, Ruth Finn, Cathy Frey, Danielle Martel, Melinda Moulton,
By Phone: Colin Ryan

Commissioners absent:

Charlotte Dennett, Jennie Gartner, Susie Hudson, Nancy LaVarnway, Kerry Secrest, Lynn Batchelor

Advisors present:

Diane Derby of U.S. Senator Leahy's Office
Katarina Lisaius of U.S. Senator Sanders' Office
Rachel Jolly of Vermont Works for Women

Guests:

Elizabeth Whitmore of the Vermont Department of Corrections,
Karen Tronsgard-Scott of the Vermont Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

Staff: Cary Brown, Hannah Myers, Lilly Talbert

Presiding: Marcia Merrill

Recording: Hannah Myers

Meeting called to order at 9:30 a.m.

Welcome/Introductions: Marcia welcomed everyone and asked them to introduce themselves.

Approval of January, 2016 Minutes

MOTION made by Laine, seconded by Melinda:

To approve the minutes as submitted.

MOTION APPROVED

Approval of February, 2016 Minutes

MOTION made by Laine, seconded by Carol:

To approve the minutes as corrected.

MOTION APPROVED

Staff/event updates:

Women, Poverty & Justice:

The Women, Poverty & Justice Event VCW organized was held Monday. The space and food were donated by Melinda & Main Street Landing. The event was standing room only, and we had Dolly

Fleming as moderator, Jan Demers, Kirby Dunn, Rita Markley, Karen Richards, and Jean Wolfe as speakers. Jean spoke about her personal experiences with homelessness.

VCW received feedback regarding priorities for addressing homelessness from attendees, which we will compile into a document and share with Commissioners, advisory organizations and policy makers. Lilly offered the idea that we could create a letter from the Commission containing the information.

Hannah will send an e-mail with the links to the PDF files of all of the documents in the packet distributed at the event to commissioners and advisors.

NEWPI:

This year's New England Women's Policy Initiative (NEWPI) conference will be held in Boston on Friday, November 18, 2016. The national Prosperity Together initiative and women of color will be the themes for this conference. The Vermont Women's Fund is getting involved with the Prosperity Together initiative. NEWPI will invite the women's organizations who are part of that program to the event. Cary invites commissioners to participate at any level of the process, planning or attending.

Upcoming Events:

Lilly passed out a handout featuring details of our upcoming events through our January 2017 Legislative Lunch. We will be forming a committee to begin planning that soon.

Melinda mentioned the upcoming United Way's Women's Leadership Council event on March, 21st featuring Anna Eleanor Roosevelt.

Diane informed the commission that the 20th Annual Women's Economic Opportunities Conference will be held on Saturday, June 4th, 2016. US Attorney General Loretta Lynch will be the keynote speaker. Cary will present at a workshop on legal rights in the workplace and Lindsey Lathrop-Ryan of Change the Story will host a workshop called Women, Work and Wages.

Legislative:

Hannah gave an update on testimony heard this morning in committee regarding alimony reform. The Vermont Alimony Reform group is asking that a study committee or task force be formed, including the judiciary, members of the bar, and people who are both payors and payees of alimony in Vermont.

State Board of Education:

Cary had a meeting with representatives from the State Board of Education to discuss where the intersections of VCW, Change the Story, and State Board of Education might be, and what steps could be taken to improve women's economic security. They discussed the idea that the timing and structure of school is challenging for parents, which is something the board had already been discussing, in the context that the board can't change that. Maybe there are different steps that could be taken. One idea

is to discuss the expansion of pre-kindergarten, which perhaps the Commission might want to participate in a conversation about. Another suggestion was that breastfeeding options for students in school could be addressed.

Commissioners offered several suggestions:

- we shouldn't dismiss the idea of changing the timing of schools
- many schools in Massachusetts have afterschool activities like arts and crafts, music, sports, etc.
- there are federal grant programs and funding for afterschool activities, snack programs, etc., with a sliding scale fee. The quality of those programs varies, and staffing those programs can be very difficult, because they tend to be part time, low wage, no benefit jobs. We have to be realistic about funding for Pre-K. Many school districts are really struggling, and we should focus on pragmatism. Emmanuel Betz @ 479-1396, runs these federal grant programs. We might hear from him.
- we could consult Let's Grow Kids or Afterschool Inc.
- look at the testimony from Act 46

Karen Tronsgard-Scott & Elizabeth Whitmore joined us to discuss transitional housing for women in Vermont.

Elizabeth Whitmore, Department of Corrections:

The Department of Corrections (DOC) is planning for an RFP on transitional housing in a year or so, this is a good opportunity for feedback. They have grown quickly in a short amount of time – in FY 2005 they had 31 beds for transitional housing, in FY2016 they had 337 beds. There are three staff working on transitional housing grants.

In FY2015, the DOC helped 707 individuals receive housing, and over 250 received housing support services, like search, retention, and aftercare case management. They also helped 73 people with a pot of funds called release money which they use to help folks with security deposits, first month's rent, short term assistance, and other needs to prevent homelessness.

There are three types of housing programs at the DOC: scattered sites; supportive housing; and structured housing. Most women's housing programs are structured housing, which provide day and evening staffing, a daily schedule of on-site programming, case management, independent living skills education, with an average night stay of 9-24 months. They have 39 beds just for women, and served 89 women in FY2015. Many of the other transitional housing programs also serve women, and those numbers are not included in the 89. The DOC works with local organizations to provide these beds, and the programs vary slightly from county to county. Waitlist priorities may vary by communities.

The number of beds available are adequate. The challenge is that the people coming through these programs are increasingly more complex. 10 years ago people just needed a few months to get on their feet. Now, they are seeing more substance abuse problems, more people with disabilities, more people that can't move on due to finances, more people that don't have any employment history, and they need programs that are more highly staffed.

The typical stay is 6-12 months, this is longer for women, some programs have stays as short as 3 months.

People do not need to live in transitional housing the whole time they're in DOC supervision, but they have to leave when they aren't under supervision any longer. The B-1 list is made up of folks who are incarcerated primarily due to housing concerns. There are currently 8 women on that list in Vermont. Many of the women on that list have tried transitional housing several times without success. Some are sex-offenders. Legislative language from 2010 prevents DOC from holding people who are non-violent, non-listed to be held solely for lack of housing. The numbers being released since October, November have increased. They are being released with or without approved housing. They are not generally seeing people released homeless on the street. The determination of how people are classified as violent vs. non-violent is based on the last crime. The DOC reports that they are not releasing SFI folks without an approved residence, and they could be part of the 8 women on the B-1 list. Housing contracts do not specifically include contracts for women for SFI, there are two beds for men in Perkinsville, and they have Pathways Housing First beds.

The 8 women on B-1 list, probably have been to one or more programs. The DOC typically releases people to their communities, this is a larger barrier for women because there are fewer programs available in each community compared to programs for men.

240 men are held in prison in Michigan. No women are held out of state.

Hearing from the Commission would be helpful.

Karen Tronsgard-Scott, Vermont Network Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

We are hearing that victims have two primary needs; they need legal representation for civil legal issues and housing. Survivors are reporting that lack of housing keeps victims of domestic violence in the home. They are seeing a lack of affordable, safe housing across the state. DCF and Emergency Housing Services tell us that 1/3 of people seeking emergency housing are seeking it because of domestic violence. We have 9 Domestic Violence shelters in VT, most are houses that have been retrofitted to be shelters. They offer around 100 beds available every day, but it depends on who's in shelter. On every given day, there is a different mix of people. Most people who come in are women with children. Sometimes beds are empty because a family of four might occupy a room with five beds, and the last bed isn't going to be filled. People live there, typically with their children. They don't get kicked out on the street during the day, and are receiving other services during the day. All of these shelters are full every night.

The Network is accessing emergency housing vouchers to put people in hotels, which they would prefer not to do. Safety in hotels and motels decreases, and often these hotels are old, and haven't been updated in decades. They are usually drive up motels. At that moment, these survivors are homeless, and are in the most dangerous time in a DV relationship which is when they leave. They are working really hard to find better solutions, and are working with DCF and Economic Services to develop a new

housing eligibility screening tool, which would give special consideration for people leaving violent homes.

At a recent Voices for Vermont's Children conference, Megan Sandel, MD, MPH from Boston presented. She spoke about a direct relationship between permanent housing and short term and long term health issues that plague people who are homeless. In states that made investments in permanent housing, negative health outcomes dropped dramatically.

The Network manages \$60,000 annually to help victims with housing, electric deposits, security deposits, and would like this to be increased to \$100,000. They could burn through all of the funds in 6 months easily. Member programs request up to \$1,000 per person, and the funds are released quarterly.

The Network supports the \$2 hotel occupancy fee, and would like 1 million of the 12 million in revenue to be dedicated to victims of domestic violence. Other states have similar taxes with success.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) has some discretionary funding, which is highly competitive, and a few of the member programs access those funds.

They have a program that helps victims repair credit, they offer match savings account with funds from the Allstate foundation. People can open a match savings account, and the Network matches their savings contributions that when goals are met. This can be set up so that the contributions look like a credit card payment to help rebuild credit, which is highly effective.

There is room to improve. We need more access to beds for women, and specifically for women coming out of corrections. We want to be thinking creatively to create pathways to housing for women coming out of corrections, the majority of which are victims of domestic and sexual violence, and housing is a cornerstone in reducing recidivism.

Karen used to live in Ohio. Ohio gives tax credits to developers who build mixed-income housing, and they have to sign a legally binding document, they have to agree to manage the housing for the length of the 30-year mortgage, they have to partner with a local non-profit which accepts funding for the building and transfers that funding to the developer. The non-profit keeps an eye on things. This has created a large number of high-quality apartments, condos, townhouses, and single family homes, and people can rent to own. The non-profits were guaranteed some housing for their clients, and the non-profits collect a management fee. She thinks we could do something like this here.

Elizabeth mentioned that ideally, DOC would be able to connect folks who are no longer under their supervision to mainstream programs that can help them on the path to permanent housing.

Karen mentioned that the lack of substance abuse, mental health, and housing services are creating a bottleneck. For as long as she has been doing this, the average stay in shelter was 22 nights. In the last 6 years, that has jumped to 35 nights. 80% of women in DOC are accessing mental health services.

Melinda would like to see a presentation like this for the Poverty Council.

Marcia asked the presenters, what's the legislative action that's needed?

Karen responded, the \$2 hotel occupancy fee. It's in the House Committee on Ways and Means.

Karen said that many of us that are social change activists are looking at what has happened in this state in the last 6 years. We grew up believing that Vermonters take care of each other, and in the last 6 years that has really shifted. Vermonters are failing children, and that will have a long term impact on our children, our state, and our ability to compete in the global economy.

Meeting adjourned at 12:23 p.m.

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