
West Virginia Women's Commission 2018 Annual Report and Legislative Recommendations



The West Virginia Women's Commission 

An office within the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

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<https://www.wvdhhr.org/wvwc/>

The West Virginia Women's Commission

The West Virginia Women's Commission (WVWC) is an agency of state government that was created by the West Virginia Legislature in 1977 to advocate for women and educate on issues relating to women. As an office of the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR), WVWC seeks to improve the legal, social, economic, educational and political status of women by working with businesses, government agencies, and non-profit groups. Eleven citizen members, appointed by the Governor, serve as Commissioners for three-year terms. They determine the goals and projects of WVWC. Seven state department heads, or designated representatives, advise and support the Commission as Ex-Officio members. WVWC meetings are held quarterly and are open to the public.



WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN'S COMMISSION
Advocacy. Education. Research.

Commissioners

Stacy North, Chair — Monongalia County*
Belinda Biafore — Marion County
Kenyatta Grant — Kanawha County
Bob Harrison — Kanawha County*
Gerald Hayden — Raleigh County
Diana Johnson — Kanawha County
Kameron Miller — Kanawha County
Beth Ross — Raleigh County
Michelle Barnes-Russell — Berkeley County

Pending Governor and Senate approval

Elizabeth Critch — Monongalia County
Karen Haring — Monongalia County
Rosemary Ketchum — Ohio County
Beth Wolfe — Putnam County

* no longer on Commission

Ex-Officio Members

Nancy Cline — Department of Education
Keri Ferro — Higher Education Policy
Commission
Cameron McKinney — Human Rights
Commission
Nancy Sullivan — Department of Health
and Human Resources
Penny Treadway — Division of Labor
(alternate Amber Showalter)
Kelly Turner — Division of Personnel
Chelsea Walker-Gaskins — Office of the
Attorney General

Staff

Julie C. Palas, J.D., Interim Executive Director
Dee M. Watters, Administrative Assistant

Since October 1, 2015, in an effort to assist with the reduction of costs and streamlining of efforts within the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, the Interim Executive Director of the Commission is also the Executive Director of the James "Tiger" Morton Catastrophic Illness Commission. Salaries are now being shared by both commissions. Additional measures are being considered to further reduce costs, increase donations and grants proposals, and increase education, research, studies, and public engagement regarding women in the state.

Our Mission

The West Virginia Women's Commission exists to foster women's health and wellness including economic, educational, political, and social development. We do this through advocacy, research, education, collaboration, partnerships, and recognition.

Our Vision

Promoting the equality and empowerment of all West Virginia women to ensure their full participation in society.

Legislative Recommendations and State Initiatives

After careful consideration, the West Virginia Women's Commission respectfully offers the following recommendations, pursuant to West Virginia Code §29-20-6. The Commissioners also look forward to working with public and private partners to bolster existing programs and initiatives provided with the goal of improving the lives of West Virginia women and their families.

West Virginia Women's Commission Funding

The Women's Commission asks that funding be restored to the 2017 levels for fiscal year 2020. The Commission cannot continue to do the work required by state code without funds. Women and girls in West Virginia deserve a fully functioning Commission that will help them to achieve gender equity; prevent sexual harassment, discrimination and violence; and attain education, family healthcare, and economic empowerment for a successful future.

Gender Equity on Boards and Commissions

West Virginia has significant female underrepresentation on state boards and commissions and in the Legislature. Women across the country have started to get involved in politics and policy making. Gender equity on boards, commissions and in the Legislature will allow women to bring a much-needed perspective to the public arena. The Commission has developed several programs to increase participation by women in these areas, including the Ready to Run trainings, Student Ambassadors program, and Women's and Girls' Day at the Legislature that introduces to student and adult participants the workings of our state Legislature. There needs to be a concerted effort to bring diversity to state-appointed boards and commissions; particularly those that have an economic, social and political impact.

For example, the State Athletic Commission oversees all amateur, professional and semi-professional combative sports in West Virginia. Although women participate in these events, a woman has never been appointed to the Commission. This is most likely an oversight, but we would request that the next vacancy be given to a woman. The Women's Commission is calling on the Governor and state Legislature to adopt a resolution that all state boards and commissions have female representation by 2025.

Sexual Harassment Policies

Sexual harassment in the #MeToo era needs to be addressed by all areas of business and government. A proactive approach is necessary to make the workplace safe and comfortable for all. Key policies for inclusivity need to be thorough and well thought out. Family leave should be equal for all employees. Sexual harassment policies should include transgender training that is practical considering attire, bathrooms, expression and identity. Trainings need to be serious, interactive and relevant. The Commission advocates a thorough review of policies and trainings. These should be revised to leave no doubt about what constitutes harassment and that it will not be tolerated.

Elder Care

West Virginia, with the second highest per capita elder population in the country, is last in quality of nursing homes and 34th in resources applied in a state. Services vary widely by county and are difficult to locate in the best of circumstances. Quality in-home services are unaffordable and many elders do not qualify for nursing home services, but still need some assistance. This needed assistance typically comes from women who work and care for children.

The Commission supports a tax incentive for assisted living centers to accept more elders at DHHR rates that would be beneficial for those who cannot afford care. The Commission is requesting a legislative committee be appointed to consider legislation and possible funding sources that could coordinate current services and programs as well as promote better solutions for the growing needs of elders in our state.

Economic Empowerment and Education

Economic hardship for women in West Virginia is still very high because of a multitude of problems. Women in West Virginia are less likely to be a part of the labor force (ranked 51st), less likely to have a college degree (also ranked 51st), and less likely to hold a management or professional position (ranked 39th). West Virginia women are more likely to live in poverty (ranked 43rd) and have a larger wage gap between men and women (ranked 50th).

These factors present significant impediments to economic security for women. The Women's Commission is advocating a variety of ways to improve the position of women in West Virginia. Through collaboration with the West Virginia Department of Education and other various organizations, girls are being encouraged to participate in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) programs in school. The Commission proposes programs that will encourage women to train in nontraditional jobs, especially as many of those positions pay more money.

Working with the Department of Education, other state agencies, state colleges and technical schools will enhance opportunities and outcomes. The Commission is advocating for a federal grant position in the Governor's Office to research grant possibilities and coordinate those programs with all state agencies.

The Commission is currently participating in the College Dreams Ignited program which helps adult women who are nontraditional students overcome barriers to going to college. The Commission is proposing a change to the Promise Scholarship program to include students who are more than two years out of high school to allow for a more robust college graduation rate.

Many women (and men) work part-time, and although they can be paid well, such as for weekend work as a hospital nurse — but because of their part-time status if they are laid off, they are ineligible for unemployment. This can be an undue hardship for families that rely on this income. The Women's Commission would like to see a study group that will consider the possibility of unemployment benefits based on earnings as opposed to hours to consider the feasibility of providing for these types of workers.

Drug Felons and Addiction Recovery

West Virginia has suffered at the hands of the drug epidemic that is sweeping across our country. Many West Virginia families have been touched by this epidemic. The Commission conducted several town hall meetings where local residents made suggestions developing a more effective way to reintegrate drug felons back into the community, such as creating programs that would provide tools and techniques to reduce stress, thus reducing the number of individuals that revert to drug use; creating employment programs that pay a reasonable wage; providing incentives to increase the number of recovery friendly employers; developing rules for reintegration programs that are not so onerous making it difficult to comply and maintain employment; adjusting the fine and fee schedule not to be so high that the program participant cannot pay them, and increasing support and treatment for mothers and babies who have neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). The Commission is requesting that these programs be revised and revamped to help individuals to stay in recovery and reintegrate into society more easily.

West Virginia Women’s Commission

Accomplishments in 2018

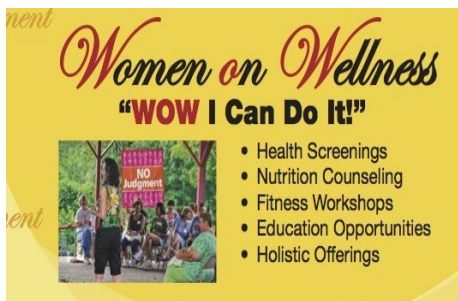
- Concentrated strategic planning with Commissioners to develop mission and goals and a two-year plan of outreach and partnerships:

- ◊ Planning guided by the five WVWC **Public Policy Pillars**: **Child Well-Being, Health, Economic Empowerment, Education and Violence Against Women Prevention**
- ◊ Realigned efforts of the Commissioners to focus within four active working committees — Economic Empowerment, Education, Wellness, and Public Policy

- ◊ Continued the program for higher education students to become WVWC Student Ambassadors as liaisons between their schools, communities and the WVWC

- Conducted public policy and statewide meetings where issue topics were discussed. Educational, partner activities and collaborative participation were shared, such as:

- ◊ Provided information about the film, *Chosen*, about human sex trafficking prevention, actions that can be taken, and tools for raised awareness
- ◊ Collaborated with West Virginia University Excellence in Women’s Health, and Libera, Inc. to create statewide Wellness Forums (photo on left)
- ◊ Held regional listening “Talk and Tea” events throughout the state with local leadership and concerned citizens
- ◊ Volunteered for and distributed educational brochures on health, education and economic empowerment at events such as the 2018 Minority Business Expo, the WV Women Veteran’s Celebration (photo on the right), Covenant House Chef’s Challenge, YWCA Stand Up for Racism, and the annual Juneteenth Celebration



- Participation by Commissioners and Student Ambassadors in various events on college campuses
- Attendance by the Director and staff representing the Commission at numerous events, such as the Women Lecture Series on Gender Equity at Marshall University, the Essential Fundraising Workshop hosted by the WV Non Profit Association, the Fairness WV Gala, and the WV Human Rights Awards
- Participation by the Director on the Advisory Board of the Governor’s Herbert Henderson Office of Minority Affairs (HHOMA), HHOMA Listening Tours throughout the state, and the Healthcare Innovation Collaborative



- Commissioners and Director to the Women’s Commission attended the National Association of Commissions on Women Annual Conference in Los Angeles, CA (photo to the left)

Our Contributions

The WVWC is the only state agency mandated to bring needs and concerns of the state’s female population to the attention of legislators and other government officials, providing services to state women as individuals and as members of organizations through

legislative monitoring, information referral, educational workshops and seminars, publication and distribution of educational materials, and research and recognition of women’s accomplishments. The WVWC:

- Conducts applied and original research on the status of women and girls in West Virginia
- Completes outreach activities focused on needs and concerns found in research activities
- Advocates for policy and programs with direct effect to the 51% population of the state
- Collaborates with statewide and national organizations to create recommendations for legislative, policy driven, and program needs of the state’s female population
- Monitors (in conjunction with 20+ state and national organizations) state-level legislation and national initiatives of interest to our female population
- Monitoring results were used to develop the Commission’s **Public Policy Pillars: Child Well-Being, Health, Economic Empowerment, Education and Violence Against Women Prevention** — which guide advocacy on behalf of the population’s interests revealed by the research





- Makes recommendations to the Legislative and Executive branches to ensure a better status for women and families in our state
- Promotes information from state and national organizations through social media, email, mailing lists and outreach at various expos
- Continues to support partner organizations in advocating for issues of concern and participates in related meetings and activities
- Coordinates events throughout the year recognizing women's past achievements and continued needs, including:

- ◊ Women's and Girls' Day at the Legislature provides opportunities to attend legislative sessions, make personal contact with legislators, and engage with community leaders to advance good citizenship
- ◊ Women's History Month Activities (March)
- ◊ Equal Pay Day (April) recognizing the disparity of pay that exists between genders

- ◊ Women's Equality (August) celebrating the 19th Amendment and women's right to vote
- ◊ Monetizing your Gift Workshop by Mel Lim
- ◊ Legacy of Women Awards in Arts, Business, Education, Government and Public Service, Labor, Sports, Mountaineer Spirit and Lifetime Achievement. (photo to the right)

Operations

- **Quarterly Meetings** — The WVWC holds four quarterly meetings around the state to discuss the business of the Commission and promote issues of importance to women. Notice of these public meetings is filed with the Secretary of State, and the public is welcome and encouraged to attend.
- **Planning Meeting** — Coinciding with one of the quarterly meetings, the planning meeting is a time for the Commissioners, Ex-Officio Members, and staff to evaluate the fiscal year and strategic plan.
- **Committee Meetings** — The Commissioners, Ex-Officio Members, members of the public and staff meet to plan programs and publications.
- **Executive Committee Meetings** — The Executive Committee, comprised of the Executive Director, Chair, Vice Chair, and DHHR Ex-Officio.
- **Job Corps Interns** — Receive assistance from and provide office experience for Charleston Job Corps Interns on a rotating six-week basis. (photo on page 6)



Ongoing Goals

- Support partner organizations in advocating for issues of concern addressed through five Public Policy Pillars: Child Well-Being, Economic Empowerment, Education, Health, and Violence Against Women Prevention
- Perform the duties of the Commission, per West Virginia Code, §29-20-2:
 - (a) To review and study the status of women in this state;
 - (b) To recommend methods of overcoming discrimination against women in public and private employment and in the exercise of their civil and political rights;
 - (c) To promote more effective methods for enabling women to develop their skills, to continue their education and to be retrained;
 - (d) To strengthen home life by directing attention to critical problems confronting women as wives, mothers, homemakers and workers;
 - (e) To make surveys in the fields of, but not limited to, education, social services, labor laws and employment policies, law enforcement, health, new and expanded services of benefit to women, legal rights, family relations and volunteer services;
 - (f) To secure appropriate recognition of women's accomplishments and contributions to this state;
 - (g) To disseminate information for the purpose of educating the public as to the existence and functions of the commission and as to matters of general beneficial interest to women; and
 - (h) To advise, consult and cooperate with other offices of the Department of Health and Human Resources and other agencies of state government, and to receive assistance therefrom, in the development of activities and programs of beneficial interest to women and on matters relating generally to women.



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