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## The West Virginia Women's Commission

The West Virginia Women's Commission 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), the Commission 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 Commission's goals and projects. Seven state department heads, or designated representatives, advise and support the Commission as Ex-Officio members. Commission meetings are held quarterly and are open to the public.

**Our Vision:** *West Virginia women and girls will prosper and have social, economic, and political equality.*

**Our Mission:** *Elevating the power and potential of West Virginia women and girls.*

### Commissioners

Belinda Biafore — Marion County  
Kenyatta Grant — Kanawha County  
Gerald Hayden — Raleigh County  
Diana Jacobs — Kanawha County  
Kameron Miller — Kanawha County  
Beth Ross — Raleigh County  
Michelle Barnes-Russell — Berkeley County

### Ex-Officio Members

Nancy Cline — WV Department of Education  
Nikki Bryant — WV Higher Education Policy Commission  
Ronald Jones — WV Human Rights Commission  
Emily Hopta — WV Department of Health & Human Resources  
Terri Dempsey — WV Division of Labor  
    (alternate Wanda 'Sue' Casto)  
Kelly Turner — WV Division of Personnel  
Chelsea Walker-Gaskins — Office of the Attorney General

### Regional Representatives

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

### Staff

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



## ***West Virginia Women's Commission Funding***

The Commission recommends its funding be restored to the 2017 levels for fiscal year 2021. 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.

## **2020 Legislative Recommendations and State Initiatives**

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



### **Gender Equity on Boards and Commissions**

West Virginia has significant female underrepresentation on state boards and commissions and in the Legislature. Gender equity on boards, commissions, and in elected positions allows for better representation and a more balanced perspective in the public arena. The Commission has developed several programs to increase participation by women including the Ready to Run trainings, Student Ambassadors program, and Women's and Girls' Day at the Legislature. A concerted effort for diversity in membership on state-appointed boards and commissions, particularly those with an economic, social, and political impact, will lead to a better West Virginia. The Commission supports an executive order or legislative resolution that all state boards and commissions have female representation by 2025.

### **Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome**

West Virginia has the highest rate of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) in the nation. Studies show that 54 out of 1,000 West Virginia children were affected by opioid use in 2017. It is estimated the opioid crisis will cost West Virginia \$4 billion in services for the children. NAS and maternal substance use disorders should not be addressed punitively, but rather by providing prevention, early intervention, addiction treatment, and recovery support services. The Commission strongly recommends that integrated programs which have demonstrated promising results, such as the West Virginia Perinatal Partnership's Drug Free Moms and Babies project, continue to be supported and expanded. Ninety percent of infants born to mothers in the program were discharged from the hospital in their mother's care. The Commission recommends babies affected by maternal substance use and those diagnosed with NAS be provided comprehensive medical, developmental, and social services.

## Perinatal Health Care

Perinatal health in West Virginia consistently ranks in the bottom few states. Pregnant women in West Virginia have a higher rate of delivery by cesarean section, a higher pre-term birth rate, more babies born with low birth weight, a higher teen birth rate, higher rates of obesity prior to pregnancy, higher rates of infant mortality, higher

rates of pre-pregnancy diabetes, higher rates of pre-pregnancy and gestational hypertension, preeclampsia, a lower initiation of prenatal care in the first trimester, a smoking rate three times the national average, and overall lower rates of breastfeeding initiation and continuation. The West Virginia Perinatal Partnership at the Central Advisory Council have identified their top perinatal health concerns facing West Virginia including perinatal, pregnancy, and childbirth education; low rates of breastfeeding; high teen pregnancy rates; early induction of labor; high pre-term birth rates; high rates of cesarean deliveries; and access to quality care, including access to skilled professionals.

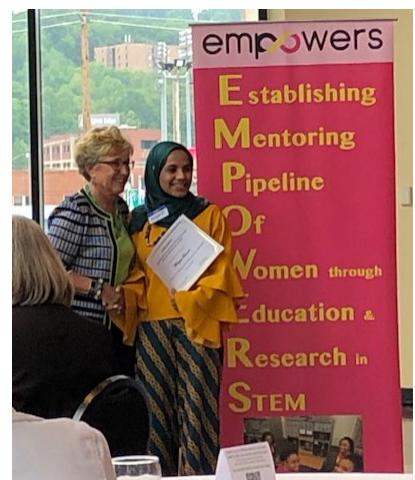
Medicaid remains the largest payor in West Virginia for prenatal care and birth; however, some pregnant women find themselves in the “gap.” The Commission commends the expansion of maternity services through the West Virginia Children’s Health Insurance Program and recommends further increasing the availability of prenatal healthcare services for pregnant women who do not meet Medicaid income guidelines. The Commission also supports expanding Medicaid healthcare coverage to one year postpartum as well as support and funding for Title X services throughout the state. Access to effective contraception, including long-acting reversible contraception (LARC), decreases unintended pregnancies.

Multiple birth facilities and prenatal care providers have closed in the last several years. This has created issues regarding accessibility to medical professionals in many communities within West Virginia. The Commission strongly recommends strategies for increasing the availability of prenatal care providers throughout the state. Policies addressing payor non-discrimination, removing regulatory barriers for midwives, providing for the licensure of more midwives, improving the climate for all non-physician providers, and establishing telehealth parity for non-physician providers to increase access to care should strongly be considered by the Legislature.

## Economic Empowerment and Education

Economic hardship for women in West Virginia is 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 Commission advocates in a variety of ways to improve the position of women in West Virginia. Through collaboration with the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) and other organizations, girls are being encouraged to participate in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) programs. The Commission proposes increasing support for programs that will encourage women to train in nontraditional jobs, such as West Virginia Women Work, as many of those areas include higher paying jobs.



Working with WVDE, 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 participates in College Dreams Ignited programs which help adult women who are non-traditional students overcome barriers 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.

## Accomplishments in 2019

- Concentrated and strategic fundraising planning with Commissioners to develop mission and goals:
  - Planning guided by the Commission's five **Public Policy Pillars**: Child Well-Being, Health, Economic Empowerment, Education, and Violence Prevention
  - Aligned efforts of the Commissioners to focus within five active working committees: Economic Empowerment, Education, Wellness, Public Policy, and Fundraising
- Participated in statewide meetings, conferences, and outreach opportunities where women's issue topics were discussed, such as:
  - Shared information about the film *Chosen*, which deals with human trafficking prevention, actions that can be taken, and tools for raising awareness.
  - Hosted regional listening "Talk and Tea" events throughout the state with local leadership and concerned citizens and compiled public response surveys to find solutions for eliminating barriers for women.
  - Volunteered for and distributed educational brochures on wellness, education, and economic empowerment at events such as the 2019 Minority Business Expo, YWCA Stand Up Against Racism, WV Rural Health Day at the Capitol, WV State University Health Expo, WV Sexual Assault and Stalking Symposium, Race for the Ribbon breast cancer awareness, and the EMPOWERS Aspirations in Computing Awards to young women.
- Attendance by the Executive Director and staff at numerous events, including presentation of Governor's Human Rights Awards, participation at the Governor's Herbert Henderson Office of Minority Affairs Listening Tours throughout the state and Healthcare Innovation Collaborative meetings.



## Our Contributions

The West Virginia Women's Commission 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 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 Commission:

- 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 a direct effect on women in the state
- Collaborates with statewide and national organizations to create recommendations for legislative, policy-driven, and programmatic needs for the state's female population
- In conjunction with more than twenty state and national organizations, monitors state-level legislation

- and national initiatives of interest to our female population
- Makes recommendations to the Legislative and Executive branches to ensure a better status for women and families in West Virginia
  - Promotes educational information from state and national organizations through social media, email, mailing lists, and outreach at various expos and conferences
  - 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 achievements and continued needs. These include:
    - Women's and Girls' Day at the Legislature, a day-long event that provides opportunities to attend legislative sessions, make personal contact with legislators, and engage with community leaders to enhance leadership building
    - Women's History Month Activities in March
    - Equal Pay Day each April, which recognizes the disparity of pay that exists between genders
    - WV Women's Equality Day (August 26) which this year heralded the year-long 2020 Centennial Celebration of the 19th Amendment and Women's Right to Vote
    - Legacy of Women Awards in Arts, Business, Education, Government and Public Service, Labor, Sports, Mountaineer Spirit and Lifetime Achievement. The Commission adds a new category, Diversity and Inclusion, for 2020.



## Operations

- Quarterly Meetings** — The Commission 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, convene as needed.
- Interns** — The Commission receives assistance from and provides office experience for Charleston Job Corps Interns and Title V Senior Employment Services Workers.

## 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:
  - To review and study the status of women in this state;
  - 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.



*The Commission thanks our staff, volunteers, partners, sponsors, donors, and all those who help us continue our efforts to improve the lives of West Virginia women and their families.*



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### **West Virginia Women's Commission**

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