



**West Virginia
Women's Commission
2020 Annual Report**



The West Virginia Women's Commission

The West Virginia Women's Commission 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
Kameron Miller — Kanawha County
Beth Ross — Raleigh County
Michelle Barnes-Russell — Berkeley County

Ex Officio Members

Eva Marcum — WV Department of Education
Angela Sundstrom — WV Higher Education Policy Commission
Leola Robinson Bateman — WV Human Rights Commission
Emily Hopta — WV Department of Health & Human Resources
Callie Saunders (alt. Joan Webb) — WV Division of Labor
Bobbie Wisniewski — WV Division of Personnel
Candace Kraus — Office of the Attorney General

Regional Representatives

Crystal Bishop — Fayette County
Elizabeth Critch — Monongalia County
Leah Glover — Putnam County
Karen Haring — Monongalia County
Elaine Harris — Kanawha County
Katonya Hart — Kanawha County
Susan Marrash-Minnerly — Kanawha County
Michelle Petties — Kanawha County
Sierra Sovine — Kanawha County
Beth Wolfe — Putnam County

Staff

Julie C. Palas, J.D., Executive Director



West Virginia Women's Commission Commitment

2020 brought new challenges amid the pandemic crisis: wearing masks, social distancing, working remotely, and learning new technology skills to continue to connect with others. However, the Commission remains committed to helping women and girls in West Virginia achieve gender equity; prevent sexual harassment, discrimination, and violence; and attain education, family healthcare, and economic empowerment for a successful future. In 2021, we look forward to strengthening our capacity and continuing our work through education, advocacy, research, and collaboration.

2021 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 Ready to Run candidacy trainings, the West Virginia Women's Commission Student Ambassador 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 affected 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 disorder 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 be considered by the Legislature.

Economic Empowerment and Education

Economic hardship for women in West Virginia is severe 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 there exists 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 career 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 such as financial and childcare needs. 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 2020

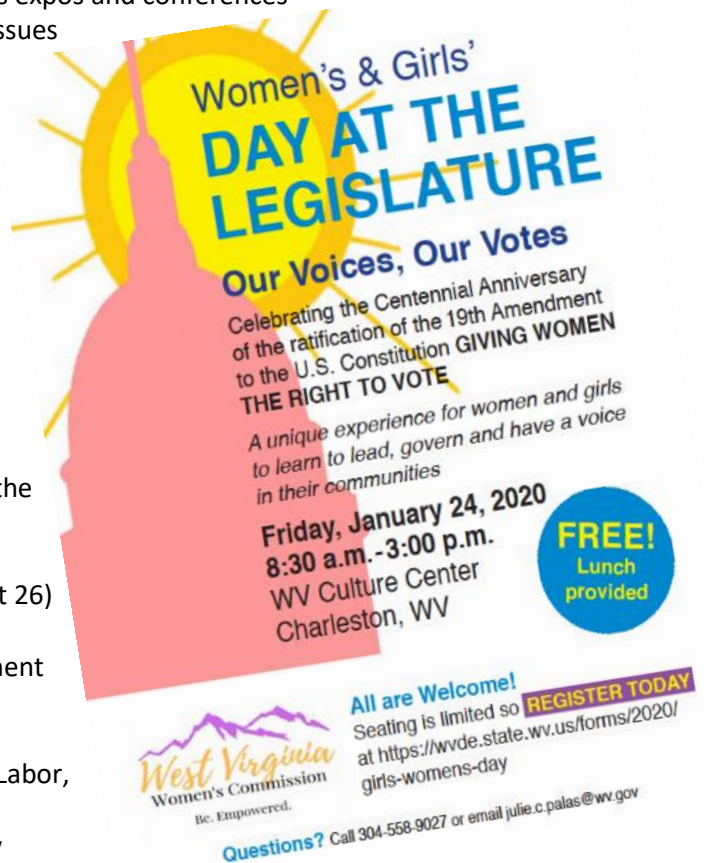
- Created an online payment option for donors to send donations for special occasions or in memoriam, and designate funds to help with programs, events, capacity building, or pay operational expenses for the Women's Commission; as a 170(c)1 government entity for a charitable purpose, donations are tax deductible.
- Participated in virtual and in-person statewide meetings, conferences, and outreach opportunities where women's issues were discussed, including:
 - Served as a member organization of WV Secretary of State Mac Warner's coordinating committee for the year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of the passage 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing women the right to vote. The Women's Commission chose "Our Voices, Our Votes" as its theme for 2020. The Commission participated in related events held throughout the year such as the all-day celebration of West Virginia's ratification of the 19th Amendment on February 17 at the State Capitol that included exhibitors, special presentations, and an outside rally on the Capitol steps. On West Virginia Women's Equality Day, August 26, the Commission hosted the virtual Legacy of Women Awards celebrating trailblazing women in the state and participated in a virtual ceremony commemorating West Virginia Women's Equality Day and the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment with Secretary of State Mac Warner and others. The statewide hashtag for the centennial celebration year was #WVWomenVote100.
 - Hosted monthly statewide "Talk and Tea" virtual events with concerned citizens and posted public response survey requests online to hear concerns about issues impacting women and to solicit solutions in eliminating barriers for women to move forward towards equality.
 - Hosted the annual West Virginia Women's Commission Public Policy Partner Meeting.
 - Hosted Women's and Girls' Day at the Legislature in January, a day-long event at the West Virginia Capitol Complex that provided opportunities to attend legislative sessions, have personal contact with legislators, engage with community leaders to enhance leadership building, and learn about the election process.
- Attendance by the Executive Director at various in-person and virtual events such as the 2020 Corporate Inclusion and Diversity calls hosted by West Virginia American Water, Charleston Job Corps Community meetings, Martin Luther King, Jr. State Holiday Commission activities, Secretary of State's One Stop Business Centers Anniversary Celebration, Governor's Herbert Henderson Office of Minority Affairs Trailblazers Award Gala, Libera, Inc.'s two-day workshop on eliminating barriers for women in West Virginia, 2020 Summit on Race Matters in West Virginia Sessions, Chat Marketing 2020 Virtual Summit, and the COVID-19 Road to Recovery Summit Autumn 2020.



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 20 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
- Supports 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 gender, race, and cultural identities
 - West Virginia 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 added a new Diversity, Equality and Inclusion category in 2020.



2020 Legacy of Women Awards Recipients

2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Ann Kathryn Flagg
"Artist or Art Supporter"
Award Recipient

Doris "Lady D" Fields

for outstanding efforts in the arts as
a performer, educator,
songwriter, and social activist



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Susan Dew Hoff
"Business or Professional Job
Pioneer" Award Recipient

Colonel Pauline Shaver

for outstanding efforts in her state
pioneering a non-traditional
professional job



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Lena Lowe Yost
"Educating Women" Award
Recipient

Bonnie Dunn

for outstanding efforts in her state
teaching women about
their personal abilities and strength



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Mildred Mitchell-Bateman
"Government and
Public Service" Recipient

Nancy Tyler

for outstanding efforts in
a high-ranking office in state government
and public service



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Sarah 'Mother' Blizzard
"Labor Activist"
Award Recipient

Elaine Harris

for outstanding efforts in
worker's rights



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Rose Gacioch
"Sports Champion"
Award Recipient

Bren Stevens

for outstanding efforts in pioneering a
position of women in sports



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Helaine Rotgin
"Mountaineer Spirit" Award
Recipient

Sharon Smith Banks

for outstanding efforts in community
and state at the grass roots level
as a volunteer



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Elizabeth Mason Harden
Gilmore "Diversity, Equality and
Inclusion" Award Recipient

Marykaye Jacquet

for outstanding efforts in promoting
diversity, equality and inclusion



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Elizabeth Mason Harden
Gilmore "Diversity, Equality and
Inclusion" Award Recipient

Katherine "Kitty" Dooley

for outstanding efforts in promoting
diversity, equality and inclusion



2020 Legacy of Women Awards

The Katherine Coleman
Goble Johnson
"Women Making History"
Award Recipient

Geraldine "Jerry" Vilar

for lifetime achievement



Operations

- **Quarterly Meetings** — The Commission holds four quarterly meetings 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.
- **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:
 - (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.



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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