



West Virginia Women's Commission

2021 Annual Report



Be. Empowered.

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.*

Governor-Appointed Commissioners



Belinda Biafore
Fayette County



Crystal Bishop
Marion County



Elizabeth Critch
Monongalia County



Leah Glover
Kanawha County



Kenyatta Grant
Kanawha County



Kameron Miller
Kanawha County



Michelle Petties
Kanawha County



Beth Redden
Raleigh County



Michelle Barnes-Russell
Berkeley County



Sierra Sovine
Kanawha County



Beth Wolfe
Putnam County

Ex-Officio Members

Eva Marcum - WV Department of Education
Angela Sundstrom - WV Higher Education Policy Commission
Tia Welch - 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

Volunteers

Karen Haring — Monongalia County
Elaine Harris — Kanawha County
Katonya Hart — Kanawha County
Susan Marrash-Minnerly — Kanawha County
Barbara White — Taylor County

Staff

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

West Virginia Women's Commission Commitment

2021 brought continued 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 2022, we look forward to strengthening our capacity and continuing our work through education, advocacy, research, and collaboration.



2022 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.



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. In 2020, 83% of the women participating in the program gave birth to a full-term infant. Illicit substance use was reduced from 72% upon entry into the program to 31% by delivery. 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 at 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 nearly four times the national average, and overall lower rates of breastfeeding initiation and continuation. The West Virginia Perinatal Partnership works on these and other issues through a number of programming, policy, and outreach educational initiatives.

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 the expansion of Medicaid coverage to one year postpartum. The Commission supports funding Title X services throughout the state. Access to effective contraception, including long-acting reversible contraception (LARC), decreases unintended pregnancies.

Multiple birth facilities 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.

The United States continues to have high rates of infant and maternal mortality when compared to other industrialized nations. In 2017, the World Health Organization reported that the US was one of only two countries to see a significant increase in the number of women who die during pregnancy or within one year after giving birth. The US maternal mortality rate is highest of all industrialized nations. The Commission recommends continued support of the WV infant and maternal mortality review committees and efforts to use the data to drive policy. The commission supports the expansion of doula services which have been shown to improve health outcomes and health equity.

Mental Health Listening Programs in Schools

A former special educator in West Virginia relayed seeing many times the distrust, blank stares, cries for help from many students both at the middle and high school level. Having a regular (possibly daily) person in the school who will listen to our students will begin to lessen the burden of many of our students and will bring education the primary student focus. This proposal would have one or two listening adults (adults from the community who have been trained with listening skills) in the lunchroom daily. This simple initiative will provide mental wellness for the entire school system. The program could begin by recommending starting groups, such as Libera, Inc., a non-profit working to eliminate barriers for women and girls, in some schools throughout the state. This initiative will provide a place for young people/students to feel safe in being vulnerable with an adult. It will start a conversation that will reduce the stigma of mental health and lead to an understanding that mental/emotional health is just as important or maybe more important than physical health. It will provide a space for young people/students to stop and breathe, find quiet, or talk, if needed. According to a study by ChildTrends.org, young people/students need one adult in their lives to listen. This initiative could begin immediately for the well-being of all young people/students in West Virginia, with an initial cost of \$125,000 to train the trainer, oversight for trained facilitators, salaries, group and trainer workbooks, background checks, and mileage, etc. This initiative could be funded through Education, Health and Human Services, Prevention and Treatment of Substance Abuse, Senior, Children and Family Issues, Economic Development, and possibly Workforce Development as all of these entities can influence the well-being of young people/students in West Virginia. Other groups that might be impacted by this initiative would be parents, grandparents, businesses, and government. When our young people/students are listened to and make changes in their own lives, the lives around them will also be impacted.

Domestic Violence Legislative and Community Issues

The West Virginia Women’s Commission supports the mission of the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WVCADV) to end personal and institutional violence in the lives of people of all genders and ages. The WVCADV works to transform social, cultural, and political attitudes through public awareness, policy

development, community organizing, education and advocacy in ways that promote values of respect, mutuality, accountability, and non-violence in local, statewide, national, and global communities. The Commission seeks legislative and community action in the following areas:



- Maintain Level Funding – Maintain level funding to licensed domestic violence programs to maintain lifesaving services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, stalking and human trafficking.
- Replace the term “Stalking” in the W.Va. Code – the term was inexplicably removed when the definition was updated in the 2020 session. This created an unintentional removal of the crime termed “stalking.” The absence of this term in the W. Va. Code leaves West Virginia with no official “stalking” statute – making West Virginia an

anomaly in the nation.

- Remove marriage exception preventing some sex abuse prosecutions - the term “sexual contact” includes an exception for married couples that essentially allows non-consensual sexual contact if parties are married. This “marriage loophole” prevents some prosecutions of sex abuse crimes when the abuser and victim are married or live together in an intimate partner situation.
- Bring the W. Va. Code addressing pre-trial diversion and deferred adjudication in compliance with the Violence Against Women Act grant conditions designed to improve accountability for offenders and safety for victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking.
- Require the Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team Report be submitted to WVCADV annually. WVCADV leads a statewide multidisciplinary effort to reduce domestic violence related deaths. This report is needed to assess impact and effectiveness of these efforts.

Make the Domestic Violence Registry Public

The National Public Registry for Domestic Violence allows a law enforcement officer to know whether a current protective order is in effect as that officer responds to a call, enhancing the safety of both the officer and the potential victim. This initiative seeks to have the registry made public so that individuals can view protective orders or violations of those orders for safety purposes before venturing into a relationship that may have dangerous results. Those who benefit from this initiative are the individuals who are entering into relationships with those who have committed domestic violence and continue to seek out vulnerable individuals.

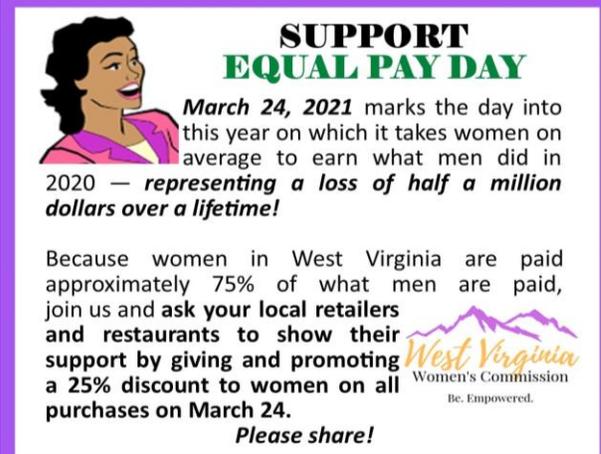
Some data can be found that might reflect the potential cost of a state’s domestic violence database. In evaluating the viability of utilizing a database as part of its sex offender registration program, Ohio estimated a cost of \$475,000 in the first year to install and implement the database software, along with \$85,000 in each subsequent year to maintain it. Virginia projected an initial cost of \$986,000 to design and develop a proposed domestic violence registry, with an additional \$126,411 each year for maintenance. The cost for each state will vary depending on the size of its population and the frequency with which domestic violence is reported and successfully prosecuted. However, even using the higher estimate of initial implementation by Virginia, passing a domestic violence database in each of the fifty states and two territories would only amount to about one percent of the annual cost of domestic violence nationwide.

Other groups with potential to be impacted by this initiative include the judicial system (through reduction of domestic violence cases in the court system) and the prison system (through having individuals view this resource to make informed decisions about their relationships and if they want to pursue said relationship further).

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.



**SUPPORT
EQUAL PAY DAY**

March 24, 2021 marks the day into this year on which it takes women on average to earn what men did in 2020 — **representing a loss of half a million dollars over a lifetime!**

Because women in West Virginia are paid approximately 75% of what men are paid, join us and **ask your local retailers and restaurants to show their support by giving and promoting a 25% discount to women on all purchases on March 24.**

Please share!

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Working with WVDE, other state agencies, state colleges and universities, 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.

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 candidate 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.

Ending Period Poverty

Period poverty is a lack of access to menstrual products, education, hygiene facilities, waste management, or a combination of these. Period poverty causes physical, mental, and emotional challenges. Financial barriers, stigma and poor education around menstrual cycles have forced many into period poverty, defined as inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products and education. The problem has worsened during the coronavirus pandemic. The Commission recommends that menstrual products and menstrual education be provided in West Virginia schools and all agencies that support public schools.

Support the Crown Act

According to a 2019 survey conducted by the JOY Collective, Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair. Black women are also 80% more likely than white women to agree with the statement, "I have to change my hair from its natural state to fit in at the office." WVWC asks for passage of legislation that will prevent discrimination based on traits historically associated with race, such as hair texture and hairstyle, in the workplace and in K-12 schools.

John Lewis Voting Rights Bill

Together, two pieces of legislation, the *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act* and the *For the People Act*, will create national standards for voting rights that ensure all Americans can safely and freely cast their ballots, that every voice is heard, and that our elections reflect the will of all the people.

Increase Funding for the PROMISE Scholarship

When the value of the PROMISE scholarship was capped at \$4,750, it covered 100% of tuition at all of West Virginia's state-supported schools. Today the PROMISE scholarship covers as little as 52% of in-state tuition and fees. The West Virginia Women's Commission asks the Legislature to increase the PROMISE award amount to help restore the access it once provided higher education for the students of West Virginia.



Accomplishments in 2021

- The Commission participated in and hosted virtual meetings, conferences, and outreach opportunities where women’s issues were discussed, including:
 - Statewide monthly public “Talk and Tea” virtual chats with different topics and guest speakers to hear different perspectives, share opinions about issues impacting women and solicit solutions for eliminating barriers for women to move forward towards equality. Participants are encouraged to complete the online survey about what matters to West Virginia women and girls.
 - The annual West Virginia Women's Commission Public Policy Partner Meeting for state and non-profit organizations to share their missions, programs, services and statewide initiatives and legislative recommendations they support.
 - The virtual 2021 Women’s and Girls’ Day at the Legislature combined with the Women’s History Month Celebration that premiered on Women’s Commission’s Facebook page and WV Public Broadcasting on March 1. The theme was “Our Past, Present and Future.” View the digital program and resource guide used in tandem with the event at <https://www.flipsnack.com/66D6955569B/women-s-girls-day-at-the-legislature-2021.html>.
 - The Women in Racing Panel hosted by First Lady Cathy Justice and Office of Minority Affairs Director Jill Upson; Charleston Job Corps Community meetings; Martin Luther King, Jr. State Holiday Commission meetings; Libera, Inc. listening workshop on eliminating barriers for women in West Virginia; 2021 Summit on Race Matters in West Virginia Sessions, Kanawha Valley National Organization for Women meetings; *Our Voices* podcast with Ray Whiting; Diversity in the Workplace Series by the Washington Post; and Partnering for Community Impact with the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation.



- The Commission continued to provide an online presence through its Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/WVaWomen>, posting educational content such as Governor Jim Justice’s news briefings accompanied by health experts to keep the public informed of vital data and resources on COVID-19; promoting events on diversity, inclusion and equality and efforts on behalf of women; and recognizing women for their accomplishments, such as congratulating the Chair of the West Virginia Women’s Commission Kenyatta Grant who was named a 2021 Woman of Achievement by the YWCA of Charleston.

- Promoted the Commission’s website at www.wvdhhr.org/wvc which provides educational information, annual publications, online resources and an online payment option for donors to send donations general use or designate funds to help with specific projects (because the Commission is a 170(c)1 government entity for a charitable purpose, donations are tax deductible).



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 that provide opportunities to attend legislative sessions, have contact with legislators, engage with community leaders to enhance leadership building, and learn about the election process.
 - Women's History Month activities in March
 - Equal Pay Day activities in March, recognizing the disparity of pay that exists between gender, race, and cultural identities.
 - West Virginia Women's Equality Day (August 26) celebrations the 19th Amendment guaranteeing a woman's right to vote.
 - Legacy of Women Awards, held biennially with categories in Arts, Business, Education, Government and Public Service, Labor, Sports, Mountaineer Spirit, Diversity, Equality and Inclusion and Lifetime Achievement.

Women's & Girls' DAY AT THE LEGISLATURE

Our Past, Present, and Future

Learning from the past,
living in the present,
and creating a brighter future.

Also celebrating the kickoff of
WV Women's History Month!

A unique virtual presentation where women and girls
can learn together to lead, govern and have
a voice in their communities.

Monday, March 1, 2021
9:00 - 10:30 a.m.

<https://m.facebook.com/WVaWomen/>
and [https://www.youtube.com/
channel/UCCYkSlBbAoEoCa8IfgBPg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCYkSlBbAoEoCa8IfgBPg)

Also airing on your WV Public Broadcasting stations at 8:00 p.m.

FREE Virtual Event

All are Welcome! **REGISTER TODAY**
at [https://wvde.state.wv.us/forms/2021/
girls-womens-day](https://wvde.state.wv.us/forms/2021/girls-womens-day) to receive additional
information. Have questions? Call 304-
558-6073 or email julie.c.palas@wv.gov.

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In the wake of the year-long celebration in 2020 of the 100th anniversary of the passage 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing women the right to vote, the Commission was asked to staff and provide administrative support for the nine-member Suffragist Memorial Committee. The Committee was created during the 2021 legislative session to create a memorial on the State Capitol grounds honoring West Virginians who efforts helped guarantee a women's right to vote in the United States. The Committee will consult with the public, solicit artist proposals, and raise funds for the memorial.

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’s Office 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, publications and make recommendations to the Commission for approval.
- **Executive Director and Staff** – Coordinate the activities of the Commission based upon the completion of the Strategic Plan and direct the day-to-day operations of the Commission.
- **Staff and Interns** — Provides administrative support and other tasks and duties at the direction of the Executive Director.

Ongoing Goals

- Support partner organizations in advocating for issues of concern addressed through the Commission’s five Public Policy Pillars: child well-being, economic empowerment, education, health, and domestic violence 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 who help continue our efforts to improve the lives of West Virginia women and their families.



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