



# WEST VIRGINIA WOMEN'S COMMISSION

Annual Report 2023



West Virginia Women's Commission

Jill Upson, Executive Director

2023

## 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 Human Services (DoHS), 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.

### Jill Upson, Executive Director

#### Governor-Appointed Commissioners

Kenyatta Grant, Chair (Kanawha County)  
 Michelle Barnes-Russell (Berkeley County)  
 Belinda Biafore (Fayette County)  
 Crystal Bishop (Marion County)  
 Elizabeth Critch (Monongalia County)  
 Leah Glover (Kanawha County)  
 Kameron Miller (Kanawha County)  
 Beth Redden (Raleigh County)  
 Sierra Sovine (Kanawha County)  
 Beth Wolfe (Putnam County)

#### Ex Officio Members

Eva Marcum – West Virginia Department of Education  
 Angela Sundstrom – West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission  
 Tia Welch – West Virginia Human Rights Commission  
 Rae Bates – West Virginia Departments of Health, Health Facilities, and Human Services  
 Callie Saunders (alt. Joan Webb) - WV Division of Labor  
 Bobbie Wisniewski – West Virginia Division of Personnel  
 Candace Kraus – Office of the Attorney General

### Duties of the West Virginia Women’s Commission, per W. Va. 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.

### 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 West Virginia 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** — Coordinates the activities of the Commission and the day-to-day operations of the Commission.

### Accomplishments in 2023

- Hosted virtual community “Talk and Tea” events with guest subject matter experts who discussed a variety of topics such as women in recovery and women in business.
- Returned to post-pandemic in-person hosting of Women’s and Girls’ Day at the Legislature. The 2023 theme was “Bridging the Divide: Engage, Empower, and Unite – coming together, learning together and standing together”. The commission shared information on policies and areas of interest to West Virginia women, girls and families.
- Celebrated Women’s History Month and received a proclamation from Governor Jim Justice honoring West Virginia Women’s History Month.
- Held a fundraiser by presenting a live production of “The Fannie Lou Hamer Story”. About the stage play: “The Fannie Lou Hamer Story” by Mzuri Moyo Aimbaye, directed by Byron C. Saunders, is an educationally-focused production that addresses the struggle for human dignity and freedom.

Aimbaye was inspired after watching a television interview with voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, whose brave commitment became a catalyst for the passage of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Hamer’s truthful account of voter registration suppression and brutal jail-house beatings moved Aimbaye to conceive the powerful one-woman stage play, “The Fannie Lou Hamer Story.”



- Increased social media engagement by acknowledging and promoting women’s issues throughout the year.
- Provided administrative support for the State of West Virginia’s Suffragist Memorial Committee, which is charged with creating a memorial on the State Capitol grounds honoring West Virginians whose efforts helped guarantee a women’s right to vote in the United States.

**West Virginia Women’s Commission**

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