

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

Fitchburg Public Hearing

REPORT

*On April 17, 2002,
The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its 9th public hearing
in Fitchburg, Massachusetts,
at Fitchburg State College
160 Pearl Street.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to
listen to the concerns of
women, girls, and organizations in Northern Massachusetts.*

*The Commission hopes that the
comments, feedback, and input of the participants
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns
facing women and girls in our state.*

Attendees

Commissioners

Kathleen Casavant
Marianne Fleckner, Chair

Elected Officials

Claire Freda, Leominster City Council
Dean J. Mazarella, Mayor of Leominster

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Staff

Priscilla Golding, Executive Director
Paula Daddona, Program Coordinator
Sonia Shah, Administrative Assistant

Participants from the Community

Marta Albizu, Gardner Visiting Nurse Association
Tania Arndt, Fitchburg State College
Becky Bunker, Fitchburg State College
Ana Cabral, Fitchburg State College
Mary Cox
Rebeca DiLiddo, Fitchburg State College
Lisa E. Dupill, Fitchburg Sentinel and Enterprise
Pratima Dutt
Harriet N. Edson
Emma Gump, Fitchburg State College
Heidi Hanson, Fitchburg State College
Keri Horenstein, Fitchburg State College
Don Hosley, Mount Wachusett Community College
Nancy Kelly, Fitchburg State College
Mollie Lazar, Battered Woman's Resource, Inc.
Marie Jo Luc, Massachusetts Trial Court
Rose Marlena
Nancy Maynard, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce
Jen Miuglionico
Dr. Carl F. Oguss, Allwin Academy
Nancy O'Mealey
Willa Peterson, Fitchburg State College
Yvonne Richard, Gardner Visiting Nurse Association
Jillie Ryan, Office of Senator Robert Antonioni
Jamie Sabino, Trial Court

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Participants from the Community, Continued

Madhu Shah, Spectro Coating Corp.
Beth Slavinkas, Fitchburg State College
Lena Ushakova, Fitchburg State College
Lisa Vaughan, Fitchburg State College
Elizabeth Vezina, Cushing Academy
Susan Williams, Fitchburg State College
Jean Worfolk, Fitchburg State College
Michele Zide, Fitchburg State College

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Commissioner Kathleen Casavant

Commissioner Casavant welcomed everyone to the public hearing. She thanked those at Fitchburg State College who provided the space and helped publicize the hearing. After giving a brief overview of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women (MCSW), Commissioner Casavant discussed the Commission's two priorities, violence against women and child care. She noted that at every public hearing, the Commission listens to testimony regarding violence against women and their families and that violence can take many forms such as physical and emotional abuse.

The Commission is working with various groups such as Jane Doe, Inc. to help women who are victims of domestic violence. Many different women's issues have been raised at the various public hearings and Commissioner Casavant encouraged people to speak about their concerns. She then explained that the testimonies would be transcribed into a report, which will be distributed to all hearing participants and the Commission's appointing authorities. It was also noted that there are other ways to have your voice heard, such as submitting written testimony in the box at the registration desk or posting comments on the Issue Boards throughout the room.

Summary of Testimony

The following summaries are based on note-takers at the meeting, staff transcribing the audiocassette recording of the testimony, and written testimony provided by those who did not speak.

Claire Freda

Leominster City Councilor; Chair, Women's Elected Municipal Officials; and Real Estate Appraiser

Ms. Freda introduced herself as the Chair of the Women's Elected Municipal Officials in Massachusetts and she also sits on the Governor's Subcommittee for housing, political housing and breaking down the barriers. Ms. Freda spoke about her position as a real estate appraiser and one of the major issues she is seeing in the appraisal field is the lack of affordable housing and the separation of families and it's affect on women and children.

When families split up, the husband can find a place to go, but the woman has custody of the children and therefore has a difficult time securing affordable house. Ms. Freda also noted that Leominster has a very strong battered women's resource program in the local community and it has a very strong board, but it can always get better.

Ms. Freda stated that she would really like to see a Women's Commission established in the Leominster area. She offered to collaborate with the chamber and local officials, who are very active in the women's movement, to make it happen.

Ms. Freda spoke a second time to address the issue of women entering into politics. She feels there is a self-esteem factor where women feel they are not smart enough to enter into politics or they assume males are better suited as elected officials. It is difficult to encourage young girls because there is a lot of self-esteem building that is needed. Ms. Freda also thinks that women are their own worst enemies sometimes because they do not do enough to support one another.

Another issue she addressed is the media bias towards women. Commissioner Fleckner asked Ms. Freda what has helped her in regards to staying in the public forum.

Ms. Freda responded that she thinks more needs to be done, such as setting up some of the commissions and maybe subcommittees of the commissions to deal with legislative issues. She also thinks there needs to be a credible range of elected women in politics and they need to be stronger in their positions and their personal life.

Commission Follow-up

Ms. Freda was interested in the formation of a Women's Commission in the Leominster area. She offered to collaborate with the chamber and local officials to establish a local women's commission.

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women met with the Mayor of Leominster to discuss establishing a Women's Commission in the Leominster area. MCSW is still in the process of communicating with the Mayor to work to establish this Commission.

Jean Worfolk

Nursing Professor at Fitchburg State College

Ms. Worfolk stated that she teaches issues in women's health so every single one of these problems is dear to her heart and she wants to get some solutions to them. There are a couple of issues that she is particularly feeling adamant about and they include the issue of sexuality education for young women, substance abuse in pregnant women, the lack of locked facilities to treat women addicts, and the need to publicize women's role in history.

Ms. Worfolk stated that the issue of sexuality education for young women is a difficult problem because it is so embedded in the communities. She feels that there are many problems in women's health due to a lack of knowledge and a lack of access. She noted the necessity for school clinics to be available for Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) testing because many young women carry STD's and do not even realize it. Women are much more affected physically by STD's than men and their fertility can be impaired for the rest of their lives. Ms. Worfolk would like the problem of the whole issue of sexuality addressed and she would like to know whether it's something that the Commission could address.

The second issue that Ms. Worfolk spoke about was substance abuse(s) in pregnant women and the lack of locked facilities to treat women addicts. She noted that in 1996, women were being incarcerated in MCI Framingham in order to get well when they were arrested for substance abuse. She said that pregnant women are being considered child abusers because they are giving drugs to minors, so they are arrested. Therefore, women are not going to

prenatal care or to hospitals to deliver their babies because they are afraid of being arrested. Moreover, rehabilitation facilities are just not available. Ms. Worfolk would like to know what the current status of this issue is and if we have done any better by women since 1996.

Ms. Worfolk also spoke about the need to publicize women's role in history. It's important for young women to know about the important contributions of women in our history. Young women need to understand where we have been and where we have to go.

Ms. Worfolk spoke later about the salaries for nursing graduates noting that there are students with salaries in the \$45,000 range. She also spoke about various problems within the nursing field. She noted that many experts believe that only about 10% of the young people that graduate from public high schools across the country receive any comprehensive sexuality education. She stated that it frightens her to think that 90% of the students coming to Fitchburg State College have had so little information about how to protect themselves. Many of them are very naïve and their whole futures can be messed up by this ignorance.

Commission Follow-up

Ms. Worfolk wanted to know more about the current status of pregnant incarcerated women and what resources are available for incarcerated pregnant women.

Aid to Incarcerated Mothers (AIM) is one organization that assists pregnant incarcerated women. AIM can be reached at: 32 Rutland Street Boston, MA 02218 or at (617) 536-0058.

Emma Gump

Nursing Student at Fitchburg State College

Ms. Gump noted that she is taking Professor Jean Worfolk's *Contemporary Issues in Women's Health* course and that it has enlightened her about a lot of issues. She feels that the lack of sexual education for women, and girls in particular, is a large problem virtually everywhere and that numbers are rising in cases of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. She stressed that if women and girls do not know about their bodies, they won't know when something is wrong. Sexually transmitted diseases have been related to cervical cancer and all sorts of female cancers; however, if STD's are caught early, it can lower your cancer risk in the future.

Ms. Gump also spoke about access to contraceptives. She stated that many schools do not hand out condoms because they feel that it will encourage children to have sex. She feels that kids are going to have sex anyway so why not help them protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy by providing contraceptives.

Ms. Gump would like to know what is available to teenagers, such as clinics. She mentioned a place in Fitchburg that does offer pro health material, but asked how available is it to students and how many people actually know about these facilities?

Commission Follow-up

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Girls Inc. is a good source for providing young people with information about health and sexuality. Girls Inc.'s headquarters can be reached at (800) 374-4475. The AIDS Action Committee also provides information about sex education. The AIDS Action Committee can be reached at (617) 437-6200. Planned Parenthood of Massachusetts also provides sex education and they can be reached at (617) 616-1660. Additionally, there are a number of websites that provide information for young people about their health and sexuality. Two notable are www.siecus.org and www.youngwomenshealth.com.

Tillie Ryan

Director of Constituent Services in Senator Robert Antonioni's office

Ms. Ryan introduced herself. She works for Senator Robert Antonioni who represents Fitchburg and Leominster. She wanted to respond to a couple of issues that were raised as she directs all the Senator's constituent services. She noted that Pro Health in Fitchburg is available to high school students and that she has a daughter in public high school that has told her that many young women are referred to Pro Health.

Regarding sex education in the schools, Ms. Ryan noted that the health program at Fitchburg High School addresses issues of sexually transmitted diseases.

Ms. Ryan stated that as far as women who are pregnant and have drug abuse problems, she has had different family members call Senator Antonioni's office for referrals, so she knows there are services available and if people would like more specific information they could call her office at 617-722-1230.

Tania Arndt

Student, Fitchburg State College

Ms. Arndt spoke about her friend who worked in the welfare system and was laid off in January. She feels as though her friend was discriminated against because she only spoke English. She indicated that while there is a need for bilingual caseworkers, there are a small majority of single white mothers that could also adequately do the job.

Ms. Arndt also spoke about allocating money for the welfare system and daycare and she suggested that in order to improve the quality of the daycare, the money could be allocated directly to the facility rather than to the individual case.

Lisa Vaughan

Nursing Student, Fitchburg State College

Ms. Vaughan introduced herself as a nursing student at Fitchburg State College. She noted that she directed the Vagina Monologues this year, the first year it was produced at Fitchburg State College. The production raised \$800 for Battered Women's Resources, Inc. in Leominster. Ms. Vaughan was concerned that some people felt that the signs, which

contained the word vagina, were offensive and derogatory so they ripped them down. She acknowledged the show itself was a bit vulgar at times, but that it has to be over the top to make its point. The show expresses various aspects of what it is like to be a woman and what it is like to deal with women's issues.

Ms. Vaughan also discussed the need to promote nursing because there is an incredible nursing shortage and it is getting worse. Commissioner Fleckner asked if there is a large enrollment this year or has the enrollment decreased and is there something we can do in support of the nursing shortage throughout the state. Ms. Vaughan responded that she is part of the junior class, which includes just under 40 students. The sophomore class has 68 students, but the numbers go back down again for the freshman class. Ms. Vaughan suggested there is a need to offer more scholarships and publicity.

Becky Bunker

Fitchburg State College

Ms. Bunker addressed the welfare system and the issue that people have two years to be on welfare from their beginning date. She feels that if people attend college while on welfare to try to better their education they should be given little more time because the two years could run out two months before they graduate. She also thinks that if people are not trying to better their lives while on welfare the two-year limit is fine. She suggested providing graduates with a six-month period to give them an opportunity to find a job. She feels that the majority of students who do graduate find a job within six months.

Nancy Kelly

Fitchburg State College

Ms. Kelly spoke about two issues that she feels are important. The first issue is all the major budget cuts that are occurring in education in the state right now and how those budget cuts are going to effect women: especially the women's studies program and the nursing program at Fitchburg State College.

The second issue is women in politics. Ms. Kelly would like to know what could be done to encourage graduating students, especially young women, to go into politics since the majority of politicians are male and it's such an expensive profession to get into and maintain.

Dr. Carl Oguss

Developmental Psychologist

Dr. Oguss feels that very well intentioned social workers were wrong minded on exactly how to help young, disadvantaged, pregnant teen girls. These social workers tell young teens that they should have avoided getting pregnant, that a pregnancy is going to make their life very difficult, that they are going to find it more difficult to get a job, and harder to finish their education.

Dr. Oguss reported that when he listened to the girls, he found that by them having children, especially for the young Hispanic population, it really saved their lives because they were allowed a role change that was accepted by their peers and accepted by the larger community.

They could “clean up their acts,” stop taking drugs, stop running around with dangerous guys, and become a good mother for which they received support.

Dr. Oguss noted that the social workers were criticized by their clients for having made the choice between either raising their own children or having a career. Very often they [the social workers] end up putting their kids in day care at a very young age and as the young girls put it, you let strangers raise your babies. The young girls said “do not tell me that it is more moral or more responsible than raising the child yourself.” The other option was to drop out of your career to raise those children by yourself for a number of years and you go back to your career after 10 or 15 years somewhat stale in your education and practice.

What we found was these girls really had a sense of wisdom about the conflict that Carol Gilligan called the *Superwoman Myth*, the idea that women can have it all. However, in reality women suffer everything from eating disorders to severe depression, especially in high functioning women, by suggesting to them that they can have a great career, be a great mother, and a great wife all at the same time.

What these girls were planning to do was to devote themselves to raising their children and then go back to college later. Dr. Oguss said that he would like to see something done to both change the status quo of how social workers approach the advice they give young girls especially after they have already become pregnant or had their first child.

The second issue Dr. Oguss spoke about was the need to promote better day care. He suggested offering more day care as non-profit high wage companies. He asked if the state legislature could perhaps do something to help make it easier for non-profit companies that wanted to start day care programs. He suggested that some of the unused property in the Leominster and Fitchburg area could be donated by the city to people who wanted to start such a program. Dr. Oguss noted that it is a shame to see that kind of space unused when it could have a benefit, especially if the cities already own it they would be able to cut a deal with someone who did a development proposal.

The last thing Dr. Oguss spoke about was his experience in helping to start many schools in Southeast Asia that assist single mothers and young women and teach them to become bilingual office staff. He recently submitted a proposal in Fitchburg for what is known as the Summer Street Fire Station on 15 Summer Street. The proposal offered a training facility called the Allwin Academy so that people, especially those who do not have sufficient English skills would be able to get the kind of English as a Second Language (ESL) skills they need for basic survival and business skills. He would like to encourage people who are in favor of this kind of facility to give city hall a call and talk to the city clerk and the Fitchburg property commission to let them know that you support this kind of proposal.

Tania Arndt

Student, Fitchburg State College

Ms. Arndt asked to address Dr. Oguss’ point about training. Ms. Arndt is a returning student after 13 years and she feels that she takes her education far more seriously now. She chose to raise her daughter first, to be the one there for her, and she feels it was a very good choice.

Ms. Arndt also feels it is a real band-aid in the system that you think that you can train bilingual secretaries because secretaries are paid \$7 an hour. She feels that this system is here to make bureaucrats feel better and also to provide them with office staff because nobody really wants that kind of a job. Secretaries are not being paid appropriately for the services they are providing; we really should be helping them go to college instead of pursuing a secretary certification program.

Willa Peterson

Administrator at Fitchburg State College

Ms. Peterson spoke about human service workers and direct care workers who are deeply affected by the budget cuts. She feels they are all underpaid and there is never been a cost of living increase for them.

Ms. Peterson also spoke about a neglected group, which is women who are highly educated and who are frequently single moms who never learned how to negotiate the economic system. These women are middle class people who are struggling and will always struggle because they are underemployed, under respected, and have no political clout. They are economically disadvantaged because they are raising children alone and having that burden combined with retirement or fixed income.

Dr. Carl Oguss

Developmental Psychologist

Dr. Oguss clarified his previous testimony. He stated that he never said he was training secretaries; he was training office workers. He said it is important to be competent in English in an English environment, and without computer competency women do not have the skills they need to go on. Women cannot go to college if they do not have these skills.

Nancy O’Mealey

Ms. O’Mealey thinks the issue that everyone is skirting is that the state needs to take a strong initiative in comparable worth. She feels that even though we have equal pay we do not have comparable worth and that most women get channeled into low paying positions and stay there. She thinks that if the state would address the issue of comparable worth, a lot of other problems might get solved along the way.

Commissioner Casavant noted that 1% of the AFL-CIO trade employees are women and those women are paid the same wage as their brothers working next to them.

Patience Moral

“I think that just because you’re black you should be able to be president and that women have the right to be president too.”

Jean Worfolk

Nursing Professor at Fitchburg State College

Ms. Worfolk spoke again and agreed there is a need for more women in politics, but one of the handicaps that women have is that many of them raise children for 15 years or so then go

back to school. So when it comes time to run for office female candidates have a very short list of achievements.

Ms. Norfolk also raised the point that women are the largest consumers of health care in the country. People who work part-time jobs, or do not make enough money, elect not to buy health care through their employer and therefore go without coverage. Ms. Norfolk feels this is by far more of a female problem. As we know that single women and their children are the poorest citizens in this country. There is a great need for equity in health care.

Ms. Norfolk hopes that Massachusetts can be a leader in this area by looking into some sort of universal health care that will give these women the coverage that they need to stay healthy. She said that she is a huge supporter of a universal health care that covers all women, all children, and all men as well; at least those who cannot buy their health insurance.

Dean Mazarrella

Mayor of Leominster

Mayor Mazarrella thanked the Commission for traveling the state in this venue. He spoke about the difficulty of reaching constituents who work two or three part-time jobs and suggested the Commission use a head start facility somewhere to hold a public hearing to make it easier for people to attend. He felt it is very important to reach out a little further to make contact with constituents.

Mayor Mazarrella said that he is very impressed by the community, and one great thing about being in the chief elected position is that you do not see color; you become color blind and gender blind because you are looking for good people in terms of community. Suddenly the color does not matter and the ethnic background of someone means little because you are looking for good people.

He applauded the people within his staff and the various organizations within his community and he noted that the Elks just elected the first woman ever to serve and lead them. He also noted that many women are hired because of their abilities and their talents and for no other reason, so we have made a lot of progress, but have more work to do.

Nancy Maynard

North Central Mass Chamber of Commerce

Ms. Maynard is with the North Central Mass Chamber of Commerce. They have an extremely active Executive Women's Business Network. She spoke about the necessity to focus in on the needs of unwed mothers and she urged everyone to do all we can to educate them and get them into the work force so they can help support their family. Ms. Maynard also feels a little more pressure should be put on the responsibility of the fathers to help these women support the children.

Ms. Maynard also spoke about the issue of women supporting other women and feels that women tend to do business with other women because they feel more comfortable, more secure, and they have a tendency to trust other women more than men.

She also spoke about some of the issues that have come forward within the Chamber Executive Women's Network group, and these are some of the same problems that women in general face. They include the fact that many women are caretakers of either elderly parents or other relatives and the need to find services. For example, the caretaker has to take time off from work when an elderly person has to be taken to the doctor's office or to the hospital.

Another issue is that statistics show that 50% of the start up businesses are owned by women and it is a fact that a lot of these women have literally reached the maximum on their credit cards and borrowed money from relatives in order to get money to start up these businesses. Ms. Maynard suggested that there needs to be some easier way for these women entrepreneurs get money to invest in their businesses. Ms. Maynard ended her testimony by saying this is a great forum and she commended the Commission.

Issue Boards

Participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing.

The topics covered by the Issue Boards were: Child Care, Economic Development/Stability, Girls' Issues, Health Care, Violence Against Women, and Other.



Child Care

- ⇒ Need affordable and developmentally appropriate and enriching day care.
- ⇒ Welfare to cover day care for part-time workers/single mothers.
- ⇒ Higher pay for more qualified day care workers. Enrichment programs for children.

Economic Development/Stability

- ⇒ Call the Mayor and City Clerk to support free training and ESL at the Allwin Academy, 15 Summer St, Fitchburg.
- ⇒ Equal Pay for equal work regardless of gender, etc.

Girls' Issues

- ⇒ Lack of knowledge about own bodies, which is physically unhealthy.
- ⇒ Lack of sex education in schools leads to pregnancy and STD's.
- ⇒ How available are contraceptives in schools (high school level and below)?
- ⇒ Sexual education information about physical health and bodies.
- ⇒ Teach our young ones to say "NO" and mean it!
- ⇒ Women should speak with "girls" about being.

Health Care

- ⇒ Empower women to help other women learn about their bodies and their choices.
- ⇒ Educate our children from very young!
- ⇒ Encouraging women to be more forward about decisions and information regarding their own health.

Violence Against Women

- ⇒ How difficult is it to prove acquaintance rape in court?
- ⇒ Do insurance companies in MA consider abused women high risk or violent encounters a preexisting condition?
- ⇒ Women would not stay in abusive relationships if they had better choices and the support to make them.
- ⇒ Let's start at the root cause of it all..."why do men/women physically abuse their partners?"
- ⇒ Increased protection for rape survivors and knowledge about protection (physical defense for them).
- ⇒ I think men shouldn't hit women.
- ⇒ At a high school level are there programs to teach girls to protect themselves? How about in the community?

Other

- ⇒ Latina and African American access to prenatal care.
- ⇒ Cutting number of social workers and doubling caseload.
- ⇒ Having a community where services collaborate to help those that are lost get on the right track.
- ⇒ Comprehensive sexual education. STD screening. Access to contraceptives.
- ⇒ Support the Allwin Academy proposal for the Summer St Fire Station by calling the Property Commission at City Hall!
- ⇒ I think that just because you're depressed they should not give ECR (Electro Convulsive Therapy).
- ⇒ Women should be able to be President.
- ⇒ Not discriminate non-Hispanic speaking welfare caseworkers.
- ⇒ Drug rehab facilities (locked) for pregnant women addicts.
- ⇒ Coverage of contraceptives by insurance companies.