

March 12, 2015

House Committee on Appropriations  
Vermont State Legislature

Good afternoon. My name is Cary Brown and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Commission on Women. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the commissioners, the staff, the 317,815 women in Vermont, and all of the people, men and women, in Vermont and beyond, who benefit from our advocacy, education, and leadership in advancing legal, social, and economic equity for women.

I've presented information on our work and our budget to you in an earlier hearing, so I won't read everything to you right now, but just give you some highlights that focus on the unique role we play in Vermont and the impact of our work on the lives of women in Vermont.

**Every year we provide resources and information to thousands of women in Vermont directly,** through our information and referral services. We maintain a comprehensive resource directory with statewide and locally based services that we use to counsel women to take action on their own behalf. This service complements others like 211 or Congressional delegates' offices, and fills a particular niche that is needed. We hear from low-income, rural women who don't have the skills or resources to go online and research, and need to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone who will listen, help them prioritize, and steer them in the right direction. We hear from women when they have exhausted other avenues, or when their needs are so complex that they don't know where to turn.

Some examples of the kinds of complex situations involving intersecting needs that we help with:

We got a call about a woman who works on a farm and is being harassed and sexually assaulted by coworkers, including an incident in which a woman's pants were pulled down in front of the group of other workers. When she complained to the farmer, his response was that he had no way to tell the workers to stop, since he didn't speak Spanish and they didn't speak English. The woman's hours and pay were subsequently cut. Her goal was simply to keep her job and have the harassment stop. We provided information regarding legal rights and referrals to avenues for enforcement, but also recognized that this was raising more complicated issues that need to be addressed more broadly than to just this one person. We contacted one of our advisory organizations, the Women's Agricultural Network and spoke to a staffer in charge of migrant education, who was able to offer services like support to the women on the farm, language interpretation to the other workers, and education to the farmer.

A grandmother called on behalf of her 18-year-old granddaughter who is a single mother of a baby. The granddaughter and baby are living with the parents of the baby's father, who have an order of protection against the baby's father. The grandmother who called wants to pick up her granddaughter and baby for a visit, but is being told by the other grandparents that she can't and that this would be kidnapping. We referred her to the organization Kin as Parents, to a free legal clinic in Burlington, and provided other legal referral services.



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We got a call from a mom of a 14 year old girl. A boy in her daughter's school coerced her daughter into saying she'd have sex with him on social media. The police are involved and the boy has been suspended from school, but the mother wants more information about what could or should have been done and what can be done now and in the future. We used the education chapter of our Legal Rights of Women in Vermont publication to give her information, and we gave her lawyer referral services.

A first time new mom has just returned to work, in a male-dominated environment, after the birth of her baby. She is breastfeeding and has requested a space to express breast milk at work. She was told to use the bathroom, which has no lock on the door, and in her first week someone walked in on her. She made a second request and was told about a room in the basement. She is looking for more information about her legal rights, and also for support in navigating a workplace that purports to want more women but is creating a difficult climate for them. We provided information on specific legal protections and direction to supportive resources and enforcement avenues.

**We create and distribute publications that are unique in Vermont** (a comprehensive list is attached). They provide information to women directly as well as to employers, helping them to understand legal rights and protections around topics such as family and medical leave, sexual harassment, domestic violence in the workplace, expressing breast milk at work, and equal pay. We also have information about being appointed to boards and commissions, and a mechanism through our website to collect names of women who are interested in appointments.

Throughout our history, **we have been at the forefront of achieving equal pay for women, and closing the wage gap.** Nationally women earn 78 cents for every dollar men earn, but in Vermont it's 83 cents.

The commission has been instrumental in working for legislation to create equal pay protections including the Vermont Fair Employment Practices Act of 2002, and the Equal Pay Act of 2013, which expanded those protections, including giving employees the right to both disclose their own pay and ask their coworkers about theirs, ending pay secrecy practices in the state. The 2013 law made Vermont the first (and still only) state in the country to guarantee workers the right to request flexible working arrangements, and as a leader in this area we are frequently consulted in our office by other states and municipalities who are exploring similar legislation. **We are engaging in the only comprehensive, statewide education effort to let both employees and employers know about this new right,** through public presentations, media appearances, publications, and grassroots education.

When Vermont's equal pay law was tested in court for the first time in 2013, we were the lead on an amicus brief that provided strong support to the plaintiff's case, and she prevailed in her suit against her employer.

As a statewide agency we have the capacity to convene organizations and individuals from widely diverse interests to collectively engage on topics of mutual concern. For example, when it became apparent that there were nursing mothers who were not able to express breast milk for their babies while at work, we came together with other state agencies, the Department of Health, national



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advocacy organizations, workplace consultants and lactation experts to advance legislation that provided this protection.

**We serve as the only clearinghouse for data and research concerning women in Vermont**, and provide this information to support the work of legislators, anti-poverty advocates, and business and leadership development organizations to help them understand the impact of their work on Vermont women.

We are the only state body that specifically analyzes the impact of policy and legislation on women in Vermont.

**We are the only entity that has the independence, neutrality, and bipartisanship that allows us to monitor the conditions for women in Vermont's correctional system and advocate on their behalf.**

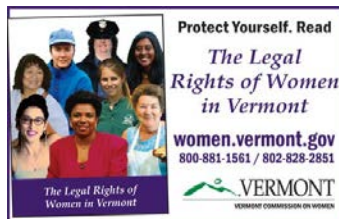
This is work we do at a systemic level, such as through participation in the Department of Corrections Advisory Committee on Women Offender Services and their Recidivism Reduction Task Force; at a community level, such as the conference we put on last fall with the Women's Legislative Caucus that brought 200 people from around the state together to work on legislative, policy, and advocacy measures to improve conditions for women; and through a direct service level, including gathering and contributing carloads of donations of books, yarn, clothes, and shoes to the prison, connecting volunteers and service providers with the prison, responding to direct correspondence with inmates seeking support, and holding open meetings in the prison to bring concerns to light. Here in the room with us today is Julie Brisson, a formerly incarcerated woman who met us at one of these open meetings, and developed an ongoing relationship with us that helped her ultimately obtain her Master's degree. I've brought a letter from Julie that reads in part, "the Commission...is a necessity for the health safety, and quality of life for Vermont's women and children as well as our communities. Because of the Commission, incarcerated women have adequate supplies of feminine hygiene products, toilet tissue, and healthier food for pregnant inmates. That was not always the case."

During the last couple of weeks we have heard from many, many Vermonters from all walks of life who value our work and rely upon it. I have brought a few letters with me, including from Melinda Moulton, Beth Sachs, Steve Gold, Stuart Comstock-Gay, Tiffany Bluemle, Nancy Heydinger, Susan McCaslin, Meg Smith, and Mike Smith. They tell us that our work to secure women's full economic participation in Vermont is not over. I also have a letter from members of the New England Women's Policy Initiative steering committee, which includes Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, the New Hampshire Women's Foundation, the Rhode Island Women's Fund, and the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women of Connecticut. They tell us that "the Vermont Commission on Women is not only vital to securing equality and economic security for the women of Vermont, but it also plays an important role in the New England region."

Thank you so much for your time today, and thank you for continuing this incredibly difficult, and incredibly important, work that you are doing on behalf of all of us.

## VERMONT COMMISSION ON WOMEN PUBLICATIONS 2015

### The Legal Rights of Women in Vermont

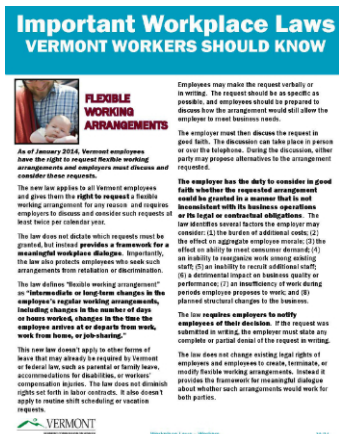


Since 1977, The Legal Rights of Women in Vermont has been a “go to” source of information for Vermont women, their families, and the professionals that serve them. Written in plain language, the handbook, although written for women, covers issues affecting all Vermonters, such as marriage and divorce, adoption, wills and probate, women’s health, employment and education, housing and public accommodations,

violence, public assistance and government benefits, insurance as well as others. New features include information on human trafficking, health insurance, same sex marriage, and immigration. The new edition allows users to link directly to the Vermont Commission on Women’s comprehensive resource directory and to federal and state statute websites. The result is reader-friendly content with easy-access reference links.

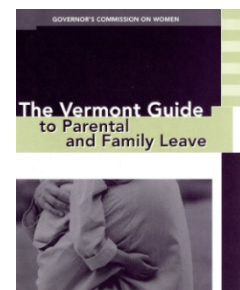
### Important Workplace Laws Vermont Workers Should Know Important Workplace Laws Vermont Employers Should Know

Our latest publications, these flyers are part of a public information campaign to educate both employers and workers in Vermont about their rights and responsibilities under the new equal pay law, which came into effect January 2014. Vermont workers now have the right to request flexible working arrangements without fear of retaliation. Those intermediate or long-term changes might include working from home, changes in the number of days or hours worked, changes in work arrival or departure times or job-sharing. Employers must discuss and consider such requests at least twice per calendar year. Other information incorporated includes current equal pay laws, how to handle suspected pay discrimination, wage disclosure laws, pregnant worker’s rights, lactation accommodations, anti-retaliation protection, and information concerning family and medical leave.



### The Vermont Guide to Parental and Family Leave

This 20-page booklet provides information for employees and employers about parental, family, and short-term leave. Information includes descriptions of federal and Vermont state laws, detailed definitions for each type of leave, and answers to commonly-asked questions.



**UPDATE: In June of 2012, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that annual and sick leave accruals are not employee benefits. Therefore, your employer is not required to accrue vacation and sick leave hours for the unpaid hours that you take off for either short-term or long-term family or parental leave. However your employer may continue to allow you to accrue vacation and sick time during either short or long term leave.**

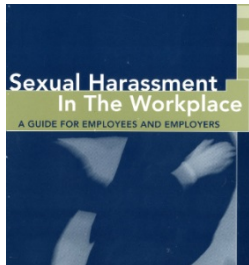


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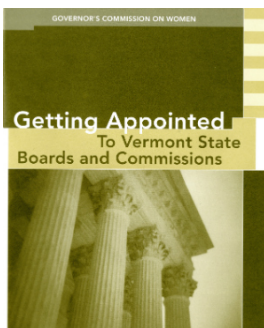
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### Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: A Guide for Employees and Employers



This 20-page booklet provides general information, including a definition of sexual harassment, descriptions of state and federal laws, policies for Vermont businesses, and steps employees can take if harassed.

### Getting Appointed to Vermont State Boards and Commissions



This 16-page booklet takes the reader through step-by-step preparation for the boards and commissions applications process.

### Vermont Employers and Workers: Domestic Violence Doesn't Stay Home When Victims Go to Work



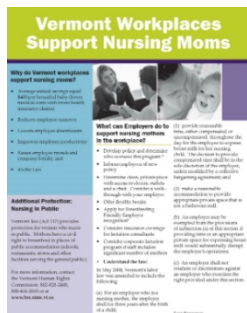
VCW partnered with the Vermont Attorney General's office, the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence and other advocates to address domestic violence as a public health and safety issue in the workplace. Download these materials for your workplace:

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## Vermont Workplaces Support Nursing Moms



Employers and employees: find out more about the needs and rights of moms returning to work.

## VCW's Report: The Status of Women and Girls in Vermont

**NEW:** [Women in Leadership and Public Life 2015](#) (PDF file, 412 KB)

[2013 Women in Public Life](#) (PDF file, 856 KB)

[2011 Women in Public Life Report](#) (PDF file, 274 KB)

[2009 Status Report](#) (PDF file, 735 KB)

[2008 Status Report](#) (PDF file, 384 KB)

[2007 Status Report](#) (PDF file, 417 KB)

[2006 Status Report](#) (PDF file, 701 KB)

[2005 Status Report](#) (PDF file, 335 KB)

## Listen, Talk, and Keep Talking



VCW's tips and tools for parents when confronted with objectionable sexual or violent language or imagery

## "What Teen Girls Say": A Statewide Survey of Vermont Girls

[2011: Relationships](#) (PDF file, 151 KB)

[2010: Employment and Education](#) (PDF file, 224 KB)

[2009: Money Matters](#) (PDF file, 1,982 KB)

[2008: Health and Wellness](#) (PDF file, 1,089 KB)

[2007: Bullying and Harassment](#) (PDF file, 1,053 KB)

[2006: Growing Up in Vermont](#) (PDF file, 1,340 KB)

## VCW's Resource Listing for Starting or Expanding a Business

VCW's List of Sexual Harassment Prevention Trainers

VCW's Listing of Education Loans and Grants

VCW Listing of Trainers for Salary, Benefits, and Flexible Workplace Issues

March 11, 2015

To Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

Understanding that this Committee is faced with making excruciating choices in the weeks ahead, we write to express deep concern about the proposal to eliminate the Vermont Commission on Women.

The VCW is the *only* state entity that actively considers the implications of state policy and budget priorities for women. It is the state's *only* source of comprehensive information about women in Vermont. It connects thousands of women each year with critical community resources. And it is the *only* body that can impartially and without penalty monitor the conditions of women in the state's correctional system.

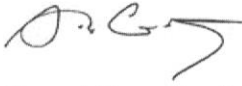
We have made progress since the Commission's inception, to be sure. But women continue to be a disproportionate share of Vermonters living in poverty:

- Women make up 2/3 of the state's minimum wage earners;
- Between 2007-13, the poverty rate of families headed by single mothers increased to over 40%; the poverty rate was nearly 60% for female-headed families with children under five;
- Elderly Vermont women are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty as elderly men;
- As a group, women who are employed full-time in Vermont lose approximately \$565,685,400 each year due to the wage gap

Clearly, VCW's work is not finished.

We know that in this economic climate *nothing* is sacred. But here's what we also know: that if eliminated, the Commission is gone for good and no other organization or body can step into the breach to carry on its particular work. The Bill and Melinda Gates and Nike Foundations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, Goldman Sachs, and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff - all have asserted that women play a critical role in fueling economic growth, not only in developing nations but in our own backyard.

With appreciation for the difficulty of your task, and for your service to Vermont,



Stuart Comstock-Gay  
*President, Vermont Community Foundation*



Steven M. Gold  
*Former State of Vermont*



Nancy Heydinger  
*Executive Director, Girls On the Run*



Susan McCaslin  
*Chair, VT Women's Fund*



Beth Sachs  
*Founder, Vermont Energy Investment Corporation*



Michael K. Smith  
*Former State of Vermont, FairPoint Communications*



Meg Smith  
*Director, VT Women's Fund*



Tiffany Bluemle  
*Former Executive Director, Vermont Works for Women*

March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015

To: Members of the House Appropriations Committee

I was extremely honored to be appointed to the Vermont Commission on Women last year. It is so difficult for me today to now try to explain how deeply saddened I am to learn that our funding may be eliminated.

I feel compelled to provide my perspective as a business leader, community volunteer, and a Commissioner about the unique value the Commission brings to our state.

No other organization in our state has so effectively or consistently led the charge for improvements in pay equity and workplace fairness. That work is far from over: the wage gap still exists in 2015 and still exists in Vermont. From the Vermont Commission on Women's earliest days in the 1960's advocating to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in all employment practices, right up to our present day "right to ask" legislation which protects employees requesting flexible work arrangements..... VCW leads the charge. The Commission also works in public policy areas. We advocate for incarcerated women, pregnant or parenting workers, where there is no other advocate for change.



Most recently, our “Then and Now: Vermont Summit on Women in Corrections” conference featured experts in this field in Vermont providing background and context for the discussion on women in corrections today, and formerly incarcerated women shared their experience. American University’s Brenda Smith provided national and international perspective and direction on this issue for next step policy recommendations.

The commission offers unique resources to women, as employers and workers. VCW has produced publications on Important Workplace Laws Vermont Employers Should Know, Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, and Vermont Guide to Parental and Family Leave. We have over the years educated our workforce and our business community.

I ask you to please consider funding the Vermont Commission on Women at the current level. Our work over the past five decades has improved the lives of Vermont women from all walks of life and circumstances. We operate on a very limited budget but the work we do has a tremendous amount of value and produces a high rate of return for the State of Vermont. As women rise in Vermont – so does the Vermont economy. Please do not eliminate our annual funding – please keep it at the same level so we can continue to do our important work for Vermont Women.

With deep respect,

Melinda Moulton

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Melinda Moulton", written in a cursive style.

CEO, Main Street Landing and VCW Commissioner



March 12, 2015

My name is Julie Brisson and I live in St. Johnsbury. I work for the Vermont Center for Independent Living as the Coordinator of the Wellness Workforce Coalition. I first met with the Vermont Commission on Women in the summer of 2009 when they came to visit at Northwest State Correctional Facility where I had been incarcerated since January 2009 for failure to complete my work crew and then lack of an improved residence.

When I was released that September, the Commission asked me to speak at UVM at the incarcerated women's forum. That was the beginning of our advocacy relationship which is now nearly 6 years old. With their support and encouragement, I obtained my Master's in Human Service.

During this crucial time in Vermont when women fight poverty, reductions in services, lack of education and addiction, the work of the Commission is even more important. The Commission is not a luxury; it is a necessity for the health, safety, and quality of life for Vermont's women and children as well as our communities. Because of the Commission, incarcerated women have adequate supplies of feminine hygiene products, toilet tissue, and healthier food for pregnant inmates. That was not always the case.

Please do not eliminate funding for them because the work they do is needed now more than ever.

Thank you.



CENTER FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS & PUBLIC POLICY  
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March 10, 2015

House Committee on Appropriations  
Vermont State Legislature  
Vermont State House  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

To Whom it May Concern,

We are writing to strongly support continued funding at current levels for the Vermont Commission on Women. We write as members of the Steering Committee the New England Women's Policy Initiative (NEWPI) of which the Vermont Commission on Women is an important member.

We started to work with the Vermont Commission on Women through the inaugural regional conference of NEWPI that was held on November 7, 2014 at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, MA. When we reached out to the Vermont Commission to join this regional effort, we did so because of their stellar reputation as a leader for women's equality, and their nationally recognized work around equal pay.

This conference – which drew over 400 women and men from across the New England – was a great success and has catalyzed a new level of regional coordination and effective policy action. The Vermont Commission made many important contributions to the conference through the tireless work of Cary Brown. She was an invaluable member of our Planning Committee for the conference, bringing her experience and insights on women's economic security into the design and execution of the program. She helped shape the conference plenaries and breakout session and its theme of economic security for all women and their families. She reviewed policy documents to ensure that Vermont's work was accurately and fully represented. She also made an excellent presentation in a conference plenary session on "Best Practices," giving an informative and inspiring talk on the Vermont Commission's leadership role on closing the gender gap in pay.

In short, the Vermont Commission on Women is not only vital to securing equality and economic security for the women of Vermont, but it also plays an important role in the New England region. It would be a loss for both the women of Vermont and the women of New England to lose the knowledge and leadership embodied in the Vermont Commission on Women. We hope you will continue funding for the Vermont Commission, recognizing its value both to the state of Vermont and to the region.

Sincerely,

Members of the Steering Committee of the New England Women's Policy Initiative, including:  
Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts Boston  
Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women  
New Hampshire Women's Foundation  
Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, Connecticut  
Women's Fund of Rhode Island