



## **Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women**

**State Liaison:** Christine Monska

**Regional Commissioners:** Donna Morelli (Pittsfield); Andrea Wadsworth (Lee) – through 12/31/21.

*\*Currently Recruiting New Commissioners*

**Regional Area:** The Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women represents all cities and towns in Berkshire County including Adams, Alford, Becket, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Dalton, Egremont, Florida, Great Barrington, Hancock, Hinsdale, Lanesborough, Lee, Lenox, Mount Washington, New Ashford, New Marlborough, North Adams, Otis, Peru, Pittsfield, Richmond, Sandisfield, Savoy, Stockbridge, West Stockbridge, Williamstown, and Windsor.

**Mission:** The purpose of the Commission shall be to advance women toward full equity in all areas of life and to promote rights and opportunities for all women. The mission of the Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women (BCCSW) is to provide a permanent, effective voice for women across Berkshire County that facilitates and fosters community and inclusiveness among women. The Commission stands for fundamental freedoms, basic human rights, and the full enjoyment of life for all women throughout their lives.

**Purpose:** To be an effective, inclusive voice and vehicle for action for all women and girls of Berkshire County

### **Areas of Concern for Women in Berkshire County**

#### **1) Domestic and sexual violence – including human trafficking for sexual exploitation**

Sharing a quote from a former Berkshire regional commissioner, steering committee member for the status of women and girls in western Massachusetts, and long-time Executive Director for the Elizabeth Freeman Center that serves Berkshire County, Janis Broderick - *“In Berkshire County, poverty, the lack of transportation, rural isolation and other factors contribute to high rates of domestic and sexual violence.”*

According to FBI crime data, Pittsfield had the fifth highest rate of rape by population in Massachusetts in 2017, with 50 rapes reported, almost four times the state average.

The number of restraining order filings, a primary indicator of domestic violence, has increased each year in Berkshire County since 2015. Berkshire County's rate of filing restraining orders by population was an estimated 36 percent higher than the state average last year. That statistic represents a call for action.

Although Berkshire County is largely rural, there are trafficking issues due to the high rate of poverty and addiction which traffickers take advantage of. In 2020, a sex trafficking ring was shut down and arrests were made. In the early to mid-2000s there were also crack downs with massage parlors and hotels that uncovered similar schemes.

There was a task force recently created to address these issues. It's also important to consider new and innovative ways to address the root causes – poverty (head of single parent households, often women who have to think about paying rent, bills, and astronomical childcare costs, finding and paying for transportation). There are not a ton of job opportunities in Berkshire County. We see a lot of people leave after high school and not return.

One of the MCSW's priority legislations is the Common Start Bill. That would be addressing one huge financial burden for mothers which is sorely needed in Berkshire County.

## **2) Issues affecting the aging population in Berkshire County.**

Women often outlive their male partners and so we see a lot of elderly women not being able to get to doctors apts. (pre-pandemic they couldn't go to community centers, councils on aging or other places for vital social interaction and support services.) Former State Senator Downing's office confirmed that this is a big issue. They got very creative and found some donated vans and a non-profit to provide local transportation on a voluntary basis for seniors.

There has to be greater attention to public transportation needs:

- Representative Farley- Bouvier (from Berkshires) co-filed H.3456 An Act relative to work and family mobility during and subsequent to the COVID-19 emergency (co-filed with Representative Barber). This bill allows individuals who are unable to prove lawful presence to use other documents to verify identity in order to receive a standard MA driver's license.

## **3) Incarcerated women from Berkshire County**

In 2014, the Berkshires started sending women to Chicopee instead of in Berkshire County (2-2.5 years related to substance abuse, sex trafficking, non-violent crimes). This makes it hard for attorneys to serve them because of distance. Families have to spend \$50+ a week on phone calls, distance is hard for families, especially mothers. It would be better to spend money on creating community-based programs.

Advocates often discuss disparities in healthcare (particularly in mental healthcare and substance use treatment), lack of childcare, and economic stability as contributing factors.

### **Highlights and Accomplishments for FY22**

- Reestablished contact with regional legislators
- Contacted former Berkshire County Commissioners to expand our knowledge of issues concerning women in Berkshire County
- Contacted community partners with our intentions to grow the Berkshire County Commission and to ask for recommendations for Commissioner candidates
- Reported on regional issues concerning women in Berkshire County at the Massachusetts Caucus of Women Legislators Conversation with MCSW Regional Commissions

### **Goals for Next Fiscal Year**

- Fill all open commission seats and choose a new Chair and Vice Chair
- Hold a series of community conversations/listening circles across Berkshire County
- Establish regional legislative priorities
- Plan an event with local and regional legislators to discuss our regional priorities

*Submitted by Christina Monska and Tina Games  
May 25, 2022*