



MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women

Annual Report 2024

Commissioners

Lisa MacDonald, Chair (Natick); Jennifer Wuelfing, Vice Chair (Hopkinton); Odessa Sanchez, Legislative Chair (Wellesley); Stacy Wilbur, Communications (Needham); Christi Apicella (Franklin), Lyndsey Brown (Hudson), Amie Rotondi (Medway); Sophia Rousseau (Natick); Alexandra Todorov (Framingham)

Intern

Mia Remington

Outgoing Members

Stephanie Deeley (December 2023)

Resigned during Fiscal Year 2023

Julie Faqir
Heather Panahi
Michele Fronk Schuckel
Nasiba Mannan

Athena Council Members

Ashwina Bangari	Prapti Kuvadia	Hilary Reuter
Julie Karam	Claire Mullen	Srihitha Sunkara
Risha Khanderia	Riddhi Paithankar	Sissy Wang

Mission

The purpose of this MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women (herein “MWCSW”) shall be to advance women toward full equity in all areas of life and to promote the rights and opportunities for all women. The mission of the MetroWest Commission is to provide a permanent, effective voice for women in MetroWest



communities, described by Chapter 335 of the Acts of 2014 as including the towns of Ashland, Bellingham, Dover, Franklin, Holliston, Hopkinton, Hudson, Maynard, Medfield, Medway, Millis, Natick, Needham, Norfolk, Northborough, Norwood, Sherborn, Southborough, Stow, Sudbury, Walpole, Wayland, Wellesley, Westborough, Weston and Wrentham and the cities of Framingham and Marlborough. The MetroWest Commission stands for fundamental freedoms, basic human rights, and the full enjoyment of life for all women throughout their lives.

Our goal as a Commission, beyond our mission statement as defined above and stated in our by-laws, is to strengthen our ability to advocate on behalf of MetroWest women. We seek to do this by listening, learning, and informing ourselves about the issues that matter to the majority of women in our region, determine effective outreach strategies and developing a robust list of stakeholders. These efforts are intended to improve our ability to play a role in the support and advancement of women and the promotion of their rights and opportunities.

Advocacy

As demonstrated through our ongoing outreach, programming, and legislative priorities, MWCSW prioritized the following issues:

- a) Menstrual Equity, b) Mental Health c) Protections and resources for individuals with lived experiences in commercial sex trade

Our commitment to each of these issues is continuously demonstrated through our outreach, programming, and partnerships with MetroWest agencies, organizations, and state legislators whose focus centers on one or more of these issues. Specifically, over the course of this year we have strengthened our partnership with R.I.A. (Ready, Inspire, Act). This organization met with us multiple times over the course of the year and we were proud to not only partner on a large-scale event, but also endorse our support for the Sex Trade Survivors Act, which included sending letters to local police chiefs and law enforcement agents to garner further support of the bill. In addition, through our partnership with R.I.A., we have made connections with other organizations throughout the state that provide similar supports and resources such as My Life, My Choice, Safe Exit Initiative, and Amirah.



On October 5, 2023, we attended a rally in support of the IAM Bill at the State House, coordinated by MassNow. We continue to partner our efforts around menstrual equity with MassNow’s Executive Director Sasha Goodfriend as well as Ceylan Rowe, a former MetroWest Regional Commissioner, but also owner and founder of Fihri, a local period product company that provides period products to menstruators in need. Through these partnerships, our advocacy efforts and reach have strengthened.

The following outlines the MWCSW legislative priorities in support of proposed state legislation:

Menstrual Equity	An Act to increase access to disposable menstrual products (known as “I AM BILL”)	Sponsors: Jay D. Livingstone , Christine P. Barber, Patricia Jehlen	S. 1381/H. 534
Mental Health	An act requiring a mental health Wellness exam for all school children	Sponsors: Priscilla Sousa	H.585
Sex Trade Survivors	An act to strengthen justice and support for sex trade survivors	Sponsors: Mary Keefe, Trisha Farley Bouvier, Cindy Friedman, Lydia Edwards	H.1597, S. 983
Womens' Incarceration	An Act establishing a jail and prison construction moratorium	Sponsors: Chynah Tyler	H.1795

On April 16, 2024, our region sent a letter to all legislators in the MetroWest region to share more about our regional group, and included our legislative priorities as well as past and upcoming events. More than anything though, this letter is one of the many ways we seek to create and maintain great working relationships with our state representatives.



Programming

The Regional Commission implemented the following programming in fiscal year 2024:

Purple Passion Walk

On September 23, 2023, MWCSW participated in the annual Purple Passion Walk, hosted by Voices Against Violence in Framingham. Voices Against Violence is a sexual assault and domestic violence support organization and caters to a majority of communities MWCSW represents. Each year the event highlights the need to combat sexual violence and allows our regional commissioners to represent our organization as well as network with others in the region whom are committed to raising awareness and combating sexual violence, including but not limited to domestic violence. Our Commissioners and Athena Council plan to once again take an active role in this year's event, date TBD.

Human Trafficking Prevention Breakfast

On Thursday, January 29, 2024, from 9:00am-11:00am, our Commission co-sponsored an in-person event at MassBay Community College in Wellesley, titled Human Trafficking Prevention Breakfast. As part of January being Human Trafficking Awareness Month, the event featured three keynote speakers—actress and activist Ashley Judd, District Attorney Kevin Hayden, and District Attorney Joe Early. The event also featured a panel of experts with lived experiences and offer insights surrounding the myths, challenges, and solutions to ending the commercial sex trade. We were pleased to welcome more than 100 guests in attendance for the event, which included our State Commission staff, state representatives, and many local leaders.

International Women's Day

On May 8, 2024, from 7:00-9:00pm, at the Common Street Spiritual Center in Natick, more than 100 people attended an in-person celebration for International Women's Day that included local vendors, artists, activists, two dance performances, and a period palooza event by Fihri. MetroWest intern Mia Remington emceed the event who then brought us an impressive list of guest speakers that included MassNow Executive Director Sasha Goodfriend, Representative Priscilla Sousa, artist Leah Marshquist, and spiritual leader Svea Fraser. Our Regional Commission is interested in making this an annual event as this event received a phenomenal amount of positive feedback.



Athena Council Menstrual Equity

On April 19, 2024, from 6:00-8:30pm at the MassBay Community College Framingham Campus Conference Room, the Athena Council members hosted an event that focused on education and advocacy for menstruation equity. Athena Council members provided a presentation on their menstrual equity survey as well as facilitated a conversation around access, education, and destigmatization surrounding menstruation. Approximately 30 people were in attendance for the event that included a staff member from Senate President Karen Spilka's office and Representative Priscilla Sousa.

Goals for the next fiscal year

Listening sessions to determine next session legislative priorities

Over the last two years, the main goal of the MWCSW has focused on creating and maintaining new and existing partnerships with local organizations and agencies. At this point, the MWCSW has done a solid job with outreach and hosting events that center around our current legislative priorities and continuously highlighting our Athena Council. As we look to what's next and in preparation for the next legislative session beginning in January 2025, it's important that we take some time in the Fall of 2024 to host listening sessions with residents in MetroWest to hone in on the most prevalent issues impacting women and girls in our region. Our listening sessions will include, but will not be limited to at least one in-person and one virtual public hearing. Dependent upon what these listening sessions yield, our regional commission is looking forward to setting our new legislative agenda that will likely blend some new legislative priorities as well as building upon our existing ones. We look forward to providing more information and assessing this initiative in the coming months.

Strengthening our Athena Council

As our Athena Council enters its sixth year since inception, we continue to be extraordinarily proud of the work of this youth group. This past year we developed and hired a former Athena Council intern, Mia Remington, to work with the girls and continue the great work being done. Julie Karam will be stepping into the role as intern this September. With six Athena Council spots opening, one of the most important things we will focus on in recruitment and selection, while ensuring that we have more representation throughout MetroWest on the Council. Following this, our focus in the



fall will be onboarding and building this young group. The Athena Council will take a more active role in partnering with the regional commissioners this coming year; while there will be plenty of opportunities for the Athena Council to work independently, it has become increasingly apparent that the success of Athena Council becomes greater when both groups work together rather than as separate entities, allowing for increased visibility, mentoring opportunities, and leadership development. We remain committed and proud of the work being done by Athena Council and it remains of utmost importance to continue to grow this program in the coming years.

Submitted by Lisa MacDonald on May 20, 2024