



North Berkshire County Public Hearing Summary
Tuesday, October 28, 2025
North Adams, MA

Executive Summary.....2

Public Testimony Highlights.....2

Recommendations & Next Steps4

About the MCSW.....5

Participants from the Community.....5

Elected Officials6

MCSW Commissioners6

MCSW Staff.....6



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COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



Executive Summary

Every year, the Commission holds multiple public hearings, listening sessions, and other events that offer an opportunity to hear directly from women and girls around the Commonwealth. The purpose of a public hearing is to give community stakeholders the opportunity to discuss issues and concerns important to women, as well as the gaps or barriers they have experienced in the provision of services available from anywhere in the Commonwealth. The information collected influences the MCSW's advocacy and legislative priorities. Public Hearings help the MCSW effectively provide a permanent, effective voice for women across MA.

This hearing was hosted as a hybrid event, some participants joining virtually on Zoom and some in person at BIC Works @ Mass MoCA in North Adams. Each public speaker was allotted 3-5 minutes to present to the commission. The MCSW also hosted American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters online and in person Spanish Interpreters.

Public Testimony Highlights

Kat Allen — Communities That Care

Kat Allen, a public health professional and mother, presented findings from the Massachusetts Student Health Survey, which has collected data from more than 40,000 youth since 2003. She highlighted significant increases in social media use, particularly among girls, and the associated rise in depression risk—up to 41–65% for each additional hour of daily use. Allen also noted a nearly 30% decline in student engagement since the widespread adoption of smartphones. She emphasized the effectiveness of school phone-free policies and encouraged the development of stronger guardrails such as age-verification standards for social media platforms.

Meg Arvin — Shirley Edgerton's ROPE Program & NAACP

Meg Arvin shared updates on programming designed to support the autonomy and leadership development of youth with diverse gender identities and girls. She described ongoing efforts to celebrate the achievements of students of color and expand financial literacy education. Arvin underscored the need for greater regional investment in youth programming and advocacy initiatives. Her testimony highlighted the importance of sustained community engagement to uplift young people of color.

Lisa Black — Lexington Resident

Lisa Black spoke in support of bills H1172 and SD3315, which propose that insurance plans covering gender-affirming care also provide coverage for de-transition care. She outlined the distinct medical and mental health needs of those seeking to de-transition and noted an increase in individuals pursuing such care, with adolescent girls transitioning at higher initial rates than boys. Black shared testimony from residents who faced barriers accessing medically necessary services due to insurance coverage gaps. She requested legislative endorsement, emphasizing the need for equitable and compassionate support for this vulnerable patient population.

Lauren Bava — Agawam Resident, Emergency Room Nurse

ER nurse Lauren Bava described a worsening mental health crisis driven by a shortage of inpatient beds, treatment facilities, and community programs. She shared that patients in acute crisis often wait days in emergency departments for care that does not exist, including a suicide survivor who remained on a stretcher for days before placement. Bava noted that the closure of psychiatric beds has severely



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



strained staff and compromised patient safety. She called for expanded funding for inpatient and outpatient facilities, mental health professionals, and community-based supports, emphasizing that this crisis is not only a health care issue but also one of public safety and human dignity.

Forest Romm — MA Resident & MA Contact for Women’s Declaration International USA

Forest Romm raised concerns about the placement of incarcerated transgender women in women’s correctional facilities, specifically alleging that some individuals assigned male at birth seek gender-affirming surgery to gain access to women’s housing units. She referenced reports of transfers to MCI–Framingham and encouraged follow-up to verify the accuracy of these claims. Romm emphasized that her concerns center on cases involving individuals with histories of violence against women. Her testimony underscored the need for clarity, transparency, and factual information regarding correctional housing policies.

Flo Pimentel — Community Advocate

Flo Pimentel spoke about the limited availability of services in the Berkshires for women in crisis, noting the region has only one hospital and one domestic violence shelter. She highlighted her long-standing work with the Elizabeth Freeman Center and stressed that virtual SANE nursing is not an effective substitute for in-person care. Pimentel also emphasized racial disparities, noting she was the only woman of color present, and called for courtrooms to better reflect the demographics of the communities they serve. She identified language barriers, fear among immigrant victims, and the difficulty of telling one’s story as major obstacles to accessing safety and justice.

Liliana Gutiérrez — Resident and Engineer

Liliana Gutiérrez testified about the lack of professional job opportunities for women in the Berkshires, sharing her own experience commuting to Springfield and New York for work. She described challenges related to transportation, seasonal employment patterns for immigrant women, and long wait times for medical appointments due to a shortage of local providers. Gutiérrez also emphasized the need for financial management programs for domestic violence survivors. She voiced support for Bill H.1380, noting that investing in education for women and girls is critical to expanding opportunity in the region.

Carine de Jong — Court Advocate, Elizabeth Freeman Center

A representative from the Elizabeth Freeman Center’s court advocacy team testified about the complex dynamics of control used by abusers, such as threats to cut off utilities or medication—an area recently recognized by the state. She emphasized the need for trauma-informed approaches and improved resource-sharing for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. Key barriers identified include inadequate translation services in courtrooms (especially on virtual platforms), lack of childcare during court proceedings, and transportation and financial challenges in rural areas. She called for strengthened support systems to ensure survivors can safely access legal and protective resources.

Ashley Flynn — Vice Chair, Women’s Veteran Advisory Committee; Navy Veteran & Nurse

Ashley Flynn shared findings from a statewide survey of more than 220 women veterans and nine in-person listening sessions. She highlighted recurring themes such as challenges accessing health care, childcare that aligns with VA appointment schedules, and limited employment support—especially in rural western Massachusetts. Flynn noted that many women veterans are unaware of the benefits available to them, and some do not self-identify as veterans due to negative past experiences. She



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



stressed the need for expanded outreach, more regional networking events, and increased visibility of veteran-specific resources to ensure women veterans across the Commonwealth receive the support they deserve.

Laura Cabrera — Commissioner, Berkshire County Commission on the Status of Women

Commissioner Laura Cabrera spoke about the challenges facing immigrant and low-income women in the Berkshires, particularly related to childcare access. She noted that some children are unable to enroll in childcare programs because they lack required documentation. Cabrera shared that many women in her community want to advocate for better resources but are afraid to come forward, and she spoke on behalf of those unable to participate. Her testimony highlighted the need for more inclusive, accessible systems that support immigrant families.

Recommendations & Next Steps

The Commission heard concerns regarding youth mental health, digital safety, gender-affirming and de-transition care, domestic and sexual violence services, women's economic opportunity, veteran access to care, rural service shortages, and the needs of immigrant women and families. The Commission extends its sincere appreciation to all individuals who offered testimony and underscores the urgency with which these matters must be addressed across the Commonwealth.

Increases in adolescent mental health concerns have been linked to increased social media use, declining school engagement, and the lack of rules and boundaries regarding device use. The Commission endorses [An Act Relative to Healthy Youth](#), which promotes digital wellbeing alongside collecting data of sexual education in schools. The Commission continues to monitor for emerging legislation regarding phone, digital, and internet use for youth in school.

The Commission emphasizes the importance of access to health care, which was reflected in the testimony on access to gender-affirming care and insurance gaps for individuals seeking de-transition. The Commission acknowledges the need for further research on legislation regarding parity in insurance for both transitioning and de-transitioning. MSCW currently endorses [An Act Establishing Medicare for All in Massachusetts](#).

The Commission is currently reviewing policies and procedures regarding concerns raised about transgender women in women's correctional facilities. MCSW endorses [An Act to Provide Reproductive Health Care to Incarcerated Individuals](#). Massachusetts' current approach is defined by the 2018 Criminal Justice Reform Act, which requires incarcerated individuals to be housed consistent with their gender identity following case-by-case review by the Department of Correction.

The Commission heard how limited shelter space, long travel distances, and language barriers limit domestic violence support in Berkshire County. The Commission recognizes that these barriers disproportionately affect immigrant women, low-income families, and women of color. The MCSW continues to lead by example in its advocacy for inclusive and equitable access to public services and identifying gaps in accessibility.



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



Limited opportunity in the Berkshires due to long commutes, lack of access to professional work, and barriers to childcare highlights some of the economic issues Berkshire County women face. These challenges align with the Commission's priorities including [An Act Expanding Access to Family, Friend, and Neighbor \(FFN\) Childcare](#) which eliminates the licensure process and [An Act Relative to Family Members Serving as Caregivers](#).

Women veterans reported difficulty in accessing VA services due to long travel distances and lack of childcare in addition to the low awareness of available benefits and limited regional support. The Commission has committed to including concerns regarding women veterans in research of equitable access to service and rural accessibility.

About the MCSW

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women ([MCSW](#)) is an independent state agency legislatively created in 1998 to advance the rights and opportunities of all women and girls in the Commonwealth. The Commission provides a permanent, effective voice and promotes an ambitious legislative agenda to advance the status of all Massachusetts women and girls. It is comprised of 19 diverse members appointed by the Governor, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Caucus of Women Legislators. Commissioners serve in a voluntary capacity and the work of the Commission is facilitated by a staff of seven, assisted by year-round interns.

The Commission stands for fundamental freedoms, basic human rights and the full enjoyment of life for all women and girls throughout their lives. For more than 25 years now, the Commission and our regional bodies have worked to advance the rights and opportunities of all women and girls across Massachusetts, and advance an inclusive environment for everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, color, sex, age, disability (seen and unseen), genetic information, sexual orientation, gender identity, parental status, marital status, socioeconomic status or background.

Participants from the Community

- Baystate Medical Center (1)
- Berkshire Commission on the Status of Women (3)
- Berkshire County NAACP (1)
- Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation (1)
- Child Care of the Berkshires (1)
- Cyber-Seniors (1)
- Elizabeth Freeman Center (12)
- Emerald Productions (1)
- Flying Cloud Institute (3)
- Franklin Regional Council of Governments (2)
- Greenfield Community College (1)
- Hampden County Commission on the Status of Women and Girls (1)
- Massachusetts Department of Transportation (1)
- North Adams City Council (1)
- Partners Interpreting (1)



THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN



Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts (1)
Plymouth County Commission on the Status of Women (2)
Pittsfield Public Schools (1)
Railroad Street Youth Project (1)
Richmond Library Trustee Board (1)
The Southern Berkshire Rural Health Network (1)
Williams College (1)
Windows of Hope: pathways 4 vets (1)
Women Veteran's Advisory Committee (1)

Elected Officials

City of North Adams: Lisa Blackmer, City Councilor
Rep Tricia Farley Bouvier's Office: Mirabai Dyson, District Legislative Aide
Sen Paul Mark's Office: Sen Paul Mark (Virtual) & Casey Pease, Director of Communications

MCSW Commissioners

Mary-dith Tuitt, Chairwoman
Christine Monska, Vice-Chairwoman
Audrey Hall, Treasurer
Kimberly Shea, Secretary
Tanisha Arena
Divya Chaturvedi
Whitney Dodds
Jean Fox
Allison Goldberg
Emily Wilson

MCSW Staff

Shaitia Spruell, Executive Director
Tina Games, Regional Commissions Director
Ellen Moorhouse, Communications & Marketing Director
Raven Harris, Executive Assistant & Clerk
Madeleine McCarthy, Regional Operations Coordinator
Christian Nakihei, Programs & Research Intern
Olivia Honeycutt, Legislative Intern

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