

ESSEX COUNTY COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Annual Report
FY 2022

Commissioners

Ogor Okoye, Chair (Saugus); Sandy Almonte, Vice Chair (Methuen); Geetha Rao Ramani, Secretary (Andover); Brianna Sullivan, Treasurer (Newburyport); Katrina Jagroop-Gomes, Operations Coordinator (Haverhill); Nicole McClain, Social Media Coordinator (Lynn); Sara Stanley, Social Media Coordinator (Rowley); Amy Smith, Commissioner (Salem); Sefatia Romero Theken, Commissioner (Gloucester)

Mission

On August 3, 2010, former Governor Deval Patrick signed legislation establishing the Essex County Commission on the Status of Women (ECCSW) to advance the women of Essex County towards full equality in all areas of life and to promote women's rights and responsibilities. The mandate behind its creation was to study, review, and report on the status of women in Essex County, and to provide a permanent, effective voice to advance the status of these women to full equality of all areas of life.

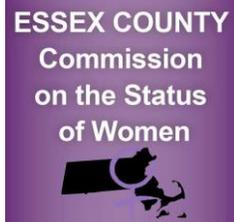
The goal of ECCSW is to uplift the voices of diverse women of Essex County and advocate for the health, safety, well-being, and economic advancement of women through community outreach, legislative advocacy, community hearings, and community education. We value equity, inclusion, and the leadership of women and girls in all areas that impact their lives.

Advocacy

In spring 2021, the ECCSW conducted a survey of women in Essex County regarding their most pressing needs and concerns which we would in turn guide our programming and advocacy for the upcoming fiscal year. The results from the survey showed that the top areas of concern for the women were childcare, housing, equal pay/fair wages/economic justice, racial justice, etc. In light of that data, we voted to make the following bills our priority legislation for the fiscal year 2021/22:

1. The Common Start Bill (HD1960/S.1307) (universal early childcare)
2. Act Requiring One Fair Wage (S.1082/H.1617)
3. I AM Bill (An Act to Increase Access to Disposable Menstrual Products in Prisons, Homeless Shelters, and Public Schools (HD651)
4. Parity on Public Boards (HD2082)

In support of these priority bills, the Commissioners prepared testimonial videos and promoted these priorities on our social media sites.



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We have continued to run our monthly meetings which are scheduled on the second Thursdays of every month virtually through Zoom and simultaneously through Facebook Live, a decision we voted upon to enable public participants join us. Though we have had a few public participants join us, there have been no new issues brought to our attention during these public meetings. We have mostly utilized these public meeting to invite organizations and groups serving women and girls in Essex County to join our meetings and share their mission and the needs they have identified in our county. In 2022, the goal has been to get the message, mission, and legislative priorities of the commission with the communities that we serve by partnering with women and girl-serving organizations to explore collaborative ideas between the ECCSW and these organizations while discussing how their various missions aligns with the mission of the commission. So far, we have hosted Budget Buddies, a group that serves women with limited income learn to budget their money and connect them with additional resources as needed. Anchor of Hope, a diaper bank serving the greater Newburyport area has come to our monthly meeting (February 2022) to discuss the diaper crisis and how women struggle to get clean diapers for the kids.

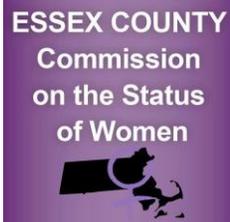
In furtherance of our 2022 initiative to connect with additional groups in Essex County to share our mission and our legislative priorities, we have met with the leadership of the Essex Women's Fund and have also made presentations on the work of ECCSW to the Newburyport Rotary Club.

With our legislative priorities, we created the educate and advocate series where we send out short videos on social media to inform the women of our priority legislation that were primarily informed by data from our survey. The Common Start Bill was one of those bills that we amplified on our Facebook page through our education videos as it was one of our priority legislations.

Programming

The Regional Commission implemented the following programming in fiscal year 2022:

Beyond Band-aids: Legislation that Fosters Survivor Independence and Safety: This was a co-sponsored program with the Women's Bar Association and HAWC (Healing Abuse, Working for Change), facilitated by our chairwoman, Ogor Okoye. The panel led a virtual discussion of three then-pending bills: "Protected at Work", "Common Start" and "Safe Communities" and how they would have a positive impact on survivors of domestic abuse seeking to increase their financial independence and safety. This program served our goal of advocating for our priority bill, Common Start, as well as two other bills that have been identified as serving and lifting up women, particularly low-income women and women who have faced domestic abuse. This program solidly aligned with our mission of advocating for the health, well-being and safety of the women and girls in Essex County.



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We kicked off the new year with a seminar titled; “*Creating Balance, Harmony and Joy in an Uncertain World.*” This was hosted via Facebook Live on January 31, 2022. It focused on self-care as many women and girls in the county were still reeling from the challenges of the pandemic and its effect on mental health. This event was facilitated by Vick Breedy, a self-care advocate, entrepreneur, and author. Ms. Breedy leads “Selfish Women Groups” to encourage women to make time for themselves amidst all the competing demands of life for their physical and mental wellbeing. Given the additional burdens the women in Essex County have faced during the pandemic, especially women of color, we felt that kicking off the year with a self-care event would provide an opportunity for women to connect and find support among each other.

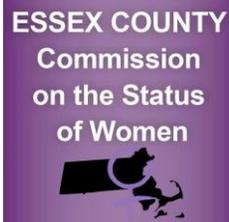
On February 17, 2022, we hosted another virtual event titled, “*What is Juneteenth?*” This program, presented in recognition of Black History Month, was led by Nicole McClain, one of our Commissioners, Founder/President of North Shore Juneteenth Association. Commissioner McClain shared the history of the holiday and its present-day significance.

Investing in Your Financial Health: A Virtual Conversation with Budget Buddies, April 14, 2022. This presentation by Budget Buddies provided an overview of their program, which helps women on a limited income learn to budget to improve their financial stability. We heard from a graduate of their program and learned ways to volunteer. This program served our purpose of connecting with groups serving Essex County and learning more about the needs of women here, as well as provided a platform for a group doing beneficial work in the community.

Amplifying the Asian Voice, May 31, 2022. A virtual conversation with local Asian America & Pacific Islander leaders about their work on advancing the AAPI voice in our communities and inspiring the next generation of AAPI women to “represent.”

Goals for the next fiscal year

Goal 1. Launch our first intern program, with the primary focus of helping ECCSW develop, recruit, and launch a new Girls’ Initiative, to be operational by the Summer of 2022. We have already received grant funding for a stipend and completed the hiring process. This goal of this program is to allow young female identifying leaders between the ages of 14-22 to be mentored by current commissioners. These young leaders will set the agenda for their program and advise the commission on the issues and topic affecting young women in the county. The goal is to have a pipeline for future commissioners bringing a youth centered lens to the mission of the commission. Each member like the commissioners will have the opportunity to serve two terms. Members will meet monthly basis alone and designate a member to meet with the Commission during their monthly meetings in order to identify active concerns while discussing plans of action to further the mission of their initiative.



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Goal 2. Continue building community connections. We have been working on connecting with groups who serve the needs of women in Essex County. Our objectives including learning more about the needs of women in the community, sharing our mission and our legislative priorities and building support and coalitions.

Goal 3. Continue to foster a closer relationship with the legislators in Essex County in line with our mandate of studying, reviewing, and reporting on the status of women in Essex County. A legislative meet and greet with our legislators was held on via zoom on June 21, 2021. That event provided valuable insights to the lawmakers relative to the needs of their women and girls constituents. The goal is to collaborate with these lawmakers and advise them on the effects of proposed legislation on women and further recommending policies that align with the needs of women and girls in Essex County. Senators Joan Lovely and Christine Minicucci have been staunch supports of the commission in ensuring that the messages of the women and girls are amplified. Following the last legislative meet and greet where we shared the most pressing needs of the women and girls in Essex, it appears to be the case that our top 4 legislative priorities are making significant progress in the legislature.

Conclusion and FY 2022 Goals

Although the world is beginning to open, the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic continues to affect our communities, especially communities of color. Childcare costs, housing insecurity, racial unrest still impact families in our county which is the reason we participated in the I AM Bill Rally organized by Mass NOW and held yesterday at the state house. This bill was recently engrossed by the Senate and currently before the House Ways and Means. The passage of this bill will tremendously benefit women and girls in Essex County, especially in our minority communities, ensuring they have access to free and disposable menstrual products in public school, homeless shelters, and Public Schools. Women and girls in our community, especially women of color, continue to struggle with loss of employment while trying to adjust to the other demands of our changing times. The Commission plans to host more events via Zoom and Facebook with the goal of bringing to these events, groups and organizations that center the needs of women in Essex County while exploring collaboration with these organizations to advance the rights, needs, and responsibility of our constituent. The commission plans to continue with our "Educate and Advocate Series" through partnering with groups and organizations serving the needs of young girls and women. The goal is to empower and educate women and girls in the community about pending legislation, self-care, financial literacy, and other topics that affect women in our community. Finally, our Girls Initiative will become operational in the coming weeks with the hiring of our new intern whose role is to work with the Commission to kick off the program. They are tasked with identifying and discussing the issues that *they* believe are most pressing in their own communities and brainstorm on policies and/or potential bills that would ameliorate those areas of need.

Submitted by Brianna Sullivan, on May 25, 2022