



2023 Commissions for Women in Maryland Virtual Roundtable Meeting

Thursday, June 1, 2023

The Maryland Commission for Women convenes an annual CFW Roundtable Meeting, inviting all the city and county Commissions for Women (CFWs) in the state to share information about their projects, priorities, initiatives and strategies. Commissions for Women are each established independently by the government of a jurisdiction (state, county or city). They are advisory boards to that government, and their commissioners are typically appointed by the executive of that government and serve as volunteers to provide a voice for the women and girls of that jurisdiction into the deliberations of that government. However, each CFW is created differently – some are established by law, some by an executive order; some have funding and staff; some are provided very few public resources to carry out their work.

In Maryland, there are 24 major jurisdictions – 23 counties and Baltimore City. There is now a total of 17 county/city CFWs in our state. Only California boasts more.

Fourteen of those 17 CFWs joined the meeting. They received an inspiring greeting from Maryland's First Lady, Dawn Moore, and an informative briefing from Ruth Howard of the National Associations for Commissions for Women. The rest of the meeting was devoted to the roundtable discussion, in which the CFW representatives shared their priorities, initiatives and challenges.

Below is a brief summary of the reports of each of the participating CFWs, in alphabetical order.

Allegany County (Luanne Cook):

Allegany County CFW has received a grant to start a mentoring program for young women in the community. It has taken many years of struggling to develop a plan to establish this mentorship program and get it off the ground. The challenge now is to find mentors in the area who can agree to mentor these young ladies and stay throughout the program. The CFW plans to start with career education, partnering with Allegany College of Maryland, taking on just five mentees at a time and with a rotation of students. Each one of the of the mentees will receive a \$500 grant to use throughout the mentorship, whether for vehicle repair needed to get to and from work when they graduate or help with childcare expenses or clothing for interviews.

Anne Arundel County (Carolyn Keaton Culp):

Anne Arundel County CFW has three areas that are priorities this year. One is a legislative committee that works with MLAW to focus on advocacy and letter writing campaigns that support laws important to women. The second priority is a women's and girls' empowerment organization started this year - a mentorship program that provides women's career panels in high schools. This committee is now considering offering the panel in middle schools as well and will spend the summer making this pilot into a

repeatable process that they can then move throughout the county and hopefully participate in all of the high schools and middle schools. The third and final priority is Survivor Advocacy and Victim Education (SAVE). The CFW has expanded the program to reach not only victims of trafficking, but also domestic abuse and domestic violence victims.

One of the biggest challenges this year is that the county executive has placed a moratorium on bringing new members onto the commission so that commissioners who leave are not being replaced. The commission can have 18 commissioners, but there are only eight serving now.

Baltimore City (Khadeja Farahmand):

This newly activated CFW had its first meeting yesterday. It has 19 members from diverse backgrounds. One priority is monitoring the workforce of Baltimore City and promoting equal pay for equal work. Another priority is providing advice to the Mayor and City Council on the concerns of women living in Baltimore City. The CFW is evaluating policies and programs with a gender equity lens ensuring that women are involved in all considerations.

The biggest challenge right now is that this is a new commission working with the city to develop its budget.

Baltimore County (Amy Blank):

The CFW's budget was passed and funds were provided to develop a working group of collaborators focusing on violence and sexual assault, human trafficking, and child and elder abuse. The group will examine various models of Family Justice Centers around the country to better serve survivors of violence. Human trafficking has been a priority for the last year two years. The CFW supported legislation mandating training and reporting for hospitality workers in hotels and motels. Now it is focused on transportation workers. All the CFWs are encouraged to join in encouraging the Department of Transportation to provide training for all employees in transportation facilities, learning to identify, report and rescue individuals who are traveling against their will. The CFW also supports the Woman of the Year awards that honor women who have served their community. It also produces a resource guide that is updated every year and ensures that it is available on all communication platforms around the county.

Calvert County (Alisha Sepsey):

Calvert County CFW holds a Women of the World ceremony each year that recognizes outstanding women in the county, and this year included a 14-year-old girl. Another priority is the CareerBuilder program, a three-part series of seminars focused on resume building, job search, and negotiating salary and interview tips.

The CFW also held a Women's Health Expo, attended by almost 500, where it partnered with Calvert Hospital and the Health Department. The CFW sponsors a clothes closet that provides needed job interview attire for woman getting back into the workforce.

Its challenges are improving visibility through marketing and advertising.

Charles County (Torri Ball):

This CFW is developing a program to support foster children in Charles County. It held a housing forum and is now redesigning the program to bring the workshop back to the community and provide information on housing and renters' rights.

It is also revamping its clothes closet for victims of domestic violence, where it partners with the Church of Hope in Waldorf. It is also refurbishing the area that was offered to them by the church, partnering with the pastor to do a grand opening. The CFW plans to hold a Women's Empowerment Summit this fall to address mental health issues and to provide its first scholarship program.

Its challenge is developing more community involvement.

Frederick County (Valerie Dougherty):

Years ago, the Commission for Women started a mentoring program on a very small scale. Over the past 15 years, it has grown and is now fully incorporated with the local community college. A priority for the past year was the Outreach Committee establishing more strategies for using social media. The CFW is actively advising its County Council on legislation. The Commission also added a Voter Outreach Committee and holds its signature awards program in March, Women's History Month, presenting an award to two or three women of note in the community. Another priority project is the She Leads Program for high school girls, providing a series of podcasts focused on high-school related issues including the effects of social media and time management.

Its challenges include marketing its events, getting turnout at events, becoming well known, and fully filling the commission with diverse people who want to be actively involved

Garrett County (Lisa Thayer Welch):

Garrett County CFW honors three women each year at its annual Hall of Fame event. It provides scholarships to five students who are at least two years out of high school and continuing their education. It also has a Woman of Tomorrow award program for a high school student. It continues to partner with other organizations in the community with an outreach program on Women's Equality Day (WED). Last year it was combined with an ongoing art exhibit, some diversity and equality issues, and included a panel of women from three different walks of life. The CFW will partner with the same organizations in the coming year with AAUW as the lead organization. This year the focus will be on women in the workplace and economic empowerment for women, offering many workshops for women of varying stages in the workforce. Finally, the commissioners hope to mentor students in one of the middle schools and continuing the program into high school.

One concern is that there is no domestic violence program or shelter or a recovery house for women in the county. Another issue is a lack of visibility for the 15-member CFW which creates challenges in recruiting new members. Commissioners are term limited and several members' terms will expire soon, leaving the CFW with only seven commissioners, so it is necessary to recruit new members soon.

Harford County (Alison Imhoff):

Harford County CFW conducted a substantial benchmark study reaching out to CFWs across the United States to learn their projects, their priorities, and their struggles, etc. Some of their commissioners were able to present the report in Annapolis last year. One thing the CFW is working on this year is expanding its Women of Tomorrow awards honoring more than 20 middle school and high school girls in their community, providing them a scholarship to support their continued education.

The CFW's challenges include a large turnover of commissioners, occasioned by the advent of the new administration. Additionally, within the last year or two, the CFW was notified that it may no longer use the "Woman of Tomorrow" name for its program because that name has been trademarked and the CFW was served a cease-and-desist order. The program has been re-named "Leading Women."

The commissioners are trying to narrow down the number of topics and identify priorities that they feel are important to the women in their county. Before COVID, the CFW held successful panel discussion events, but since COVID, the CFW has only organized zoom meetings. However, it is considering returning to in-person events in the Fall. This CFW, like others, is working to increase its visibility in the community.

Montgomery County CFW (Donna Rojas):

Montgomery County CFW continues to advise the County Executive, County Council, the public, and agencies of the county, state and federal governments regarding women's issues, providing advocacy from a local and state perspective. In FY24, it will receive funding from the county government to pay interns, who are so helpful, especially on the legislative and reporting side. Its Human Trafficking Prevention Committee continues to train, support and work with community-based organizations and the Montgomery County Police Department in combatting human trafficking, and it continues to collaborate with the Family Justice Center (FJC) to address domestic violence issues. The Commission supports the FJC's Choose Respect event which educates middle and high school students about healthy dating. In collaboration with Montgomery Women, the CFW had its yearly Women Making History event, that acknowledges 31 women in March, Women's History Month, on its social media spaces, and it held the culminating event this year with its first in-person celebration of all 31 women. It publishes a weekly online newsletter with a subscription that is now up to 20,000 individuals. It uses Instagram and Facebook with frequent updates. The Commission recognizes talented girls in the county each year through its Girl Power Writing contest, in partnership with the Montgomery County Libraries. It also offers in-person and virtual webinars on such topics as financial wellness, self-defense, separation and divorce, career and workforce development. Each January, the CFW organizes its signature event, the annual Women's Legislative Briefing. The key areas for both women and girls this year were economic and financial security, women and leadership training, workforce issues, women's health, safety and security. Before the pandemic, the CFW sponsored a re-entry prison group where women were able to meet with a licensed clinical social worker. The CFW will examine whether there is still a need and will consider incorporating it back into its programs.

An area of challenge for this CFW is that it can't do everything, including responding to all the calls to its office. It is important to continue an even deeper dive with community-based organizations to ensure that the needs of women and girls are met, with the CFW focusing on "macro" issues such as legislation, program, and policy concerns, while service providers address these concerns at the "micro" level – helping individuals in need.

Prince George's County (Deborah Wilder):

One of the challenges for the commission is the turnover of its own commissioners, as replenishing the Commission doesn't occur immediately. Commissioners must go through a process of appointment by the County Executive, then must be approved by the County Council. So, the CFW has been down several commissioners this year. As a result, it has focused on partnerships. It collaborated with the Commission for Fathers, Men and Boys on a couple of activities, including a community fair at the end of last summer. It co-sponsored an event in February for families, and one with the Department of Health to hold a Youth Mental Health Expo. It will be working with the County Executive's office on a "Prince George's County Goes Pink" campaign in honor of breast cancer awareness. Its legislative committee collaborated with MLAW in its legislative campaign and it adopted those bills that mirrored the goals in Prince George's County. It posted the outcomes from the legislative session on its website. The commission publishes a monthly newsletter with information of interest to women and girls in Prince George's County.

In September most of the current commissioners will transition off the CFW and, with many new commissioners coming on board.

St. Mary's County (Catherine Stewart)

Whenever there is something important relating to women or women's history, the CFW encourages the county government to issue proclamations in recognition. It coordinates the Jane Hale Cypress Scholarship fund that is now endowed at the College of Southern Maryland, helping residents return to college to earn a degree, in addition to a Women's History Month banquet, the Women of the Year, and Tomorrow's Woman awards programs.

Last year, during the pandemic, it had a virtual event recognizing the Health Department Director's leadership in the fight against COVID, presenting the Director with the Hero Awards. In 2023 the CFW recognized one of the local food pantries with the Hero Award.

As the CFW addresses important issues concerning women or families, it partners with the Homeless Prevention Board in the county, the Family Violence Coordinating Council, and the Violence, Trauma and Injury Council. It also recently recruited a young woman to participate on behalf of the CFW in MLAW activities. Annually the CFW visits the local Veterans home and recognizes the female veterans and/or female spouses of a veteran.

Washington County (Elise Weber):

Last year and continuing this year, the CFW will co-sponsor a TEDx program. TEDx is an offshoot of the official TED programs, but it was a half a day and featured five women of achievement in this county. This will be the CFW's signature event. It also provides women's achievement awards and partners with other organizations on various programs.

One of the CFW's challenges is enhancing its visibility so it is focused on increasing its social media presence. Commissioners also attend their County Commission meetings and use the public comment time as an opportunity to get the CFW's information in the public view.

Wicomico County (Dr. Katherine Jones):

Over the course of the past year, the CFW has made sure that its presence is known with the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Salisbury Committee. It has focused on the lack of affordable childcare as a major reason women are not able to return to work after the pandemic, the need for preschool for children ages three and four and the closure of more daycare providers on the Eastern Shore and the Lower Shore. The CFW organized a luncheon for the end of the legislative session for local legislators. The Commission also sponsored an open house to showcase one business that permits women to bring their children to work at no cost to the business. The CFW also requested a Proclamation for Women's History Month and provided pins to the elected officials and government employees on International Women's Day, which also marked the Commission's one year anniversary.

Some of its challenges are that it has only been a year since the CFW's inception, and maintain its membership. It started out with 15 members and then quickly went down to seven. Another challenge is that in the negotiations to get the CFW reinstated, it had to forgo the funding that Wicomico County used to provide. The CFW is developing a letter to the County Executive and the County Council members, requesting funding and the administrative support it once received.

Maryland Commission for Women (Tawanda Bailey):

The Maryland Commission for Women has 25 commissioners from across the state. The MCW maintains an active Policy and Legislative Action Committee that acts on its legislative agenda for the year.

Each year, the MCW inducts five women into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame – women whose contributions and achievements are of historic significance. The biographies of all the more than 200 women who have been inducted since 1985 can be found on the website of the [Maryland State Archives](#). The MCW is also the sponsor of the Maryland Young Women Leaders Awards, including a \$500 scholastic award, presented to five high school students with records of academic excellence, extraordinary community service and outstanding leadership. The Call for Nominations for both the Hall of Fame and the Young Women Leaders Awards will go out in early October.

One of the MCW's most important projects has been its research on the Status of Women in Maryland. All the CFWs in the state collaborated with the MCW on the *Voices of Maryland Women Listening Tour*, the report of which was published in 2018. The second phase of the research, collecting demographic data that further describe the circumstances of women in the state was launched in 2020. *Maryland Women: A Status Report* was published in June 2021, and research on the impact of the pandemic on Maryland women began immediately after, culminating in *At the Heart of the Pandemic – Maryland Women and the COVID19 Crisis*, published in April, 2022.

This year, in addition to its legislative committee and its Hall of Fame/Young Women Leaders awards program, the commission established an Advocacy and Collaboration Taskforce with two goals: to promote the recommendations stemming from the research on the impact of the pandemic on Maryland women and to encourage the establishment of commissions for women in the six remaining counties where there is not yet a CFW. One of the MCW's continuing priorities is to support the work of the county and city CFWs in our state. Convening the annual CFW Roundtable Meeting is one strategy for carrying out that initiative.