

Monroe County Women's Commission

Monroe County, Indiana

2015 Annual Report

The Monroe County Women's Commission was established in 2011 (Ordinance 2011-06) to serve in an advisory role to assist residents, businesses, and the government of Monroe County, Indiana, in addressing issues of gender equity in all aspects of society.

The Commission consists of community members appointed by the Monroe County Board of Commissioners and the Monroe County Council, an appointee from Indiana University, and an appointee from the City of Bloomington Commission on the Status of Women.



The MCWC sponsored a booth at the 2015 Women's History Month luncheon. Chair Nancy White and volunteer Monica Dignam are shown above.

2015 Commissioners and Volunteers

Commissioners	Appointed By
Shirley Fitzgibbons	Monroe County Council
Martha Miller	Monroe County Council
Morgan Mohr	Monroe County Council
Amy Swain	Monroe County Council
Nancy White (2015 chair)	Monroe County Council
Amanda Barge	Monroe County Board of Commissioners
Liz Feitl (2015 vice-chair)	Monroe County Board of Commissioners
Debby Herbenick	Monroe County Board of Commissioners
Lara Weaver	Monroe County Board of Commissioners
Iris Kiesling	Monroe County Board of Commissioners
Position Open	Indiana University
Position Open	City of Bloomington Commission on the Status of Women

The Commissioners listed above served throughout 2015, with the following exceptions:

- Martha Miller resigned from the Commission in September 2015.
- Morgan Mohr resigned from the Commission in March 2015.
- Amy Swain was appointed to the Commission in April 2015.

In February 2015 two volunteers were named to assist with Commission tasks: Ann Birch for clerical tasks and Monica Dignam for research projects.

MCWC Website:

<http://www.co.monroe.in.us/tsd/Government/Commissioners/MonroeCountyBoardsandCommissions/WomensCommission.aspx>

2015 Research and Projects

Brainstorming sessions were conducted early in the year, not only to explore areas of need where the Commission could gather information and have an impact, but also to begin to establish a long-term focus. The Commission decided upon the needs of rural women as a long-term focus. To this end, several projects and research areas were established:

- Fair survey at the Monroe County Fair
- Township trustees focus group
- Health care and resources for rural women

Although this long-term focus helps direct the Commission's efforts, it does not limit those efforts. Several areas were explored that are of general interest to women regardless of where they live:

- Promoting 2-1-1 as a source for women
- Fair Labor Standards Act and raising the minimum wage
- Effects of IU study on sexual assault
- Collaboration with other women's commissions/groups and with legislators

These topics are briefly discussed below.

Fair Survey at the Monroe County Fair

The MCWC conducted a brief written survey during the Monroe County Fair, held July 25 to August 1, 2015. (Surveys were also distributed to the Monroe County Extension Homemakers Association.) Questionnaires were available to voluntary respondents at five locations on the fairgrounds. In each location 50 blank questionnaires were placed along with a box to collect the completed responses. Three open-ended questions asked respondents to share their perspectives on the challenges faced by women in their community, the barriers keeping respondents from improving their quality of life, and suggestions for ways to help women in their community.

Thirty-nine women completed at least part of the survey. Four top challenges emerged: 1) childcare, 2) fair wages, 3) safety/violence, 4) health care/mental health care. Other data from the survey reinforced the importance of these issues. Although the survey was not intended as a "scientific" survey, it did give the Commission a defined list of topics on which to focus.

Township Trustees Focus Group

As a follow-up to the input from the survey distributed at the county fair, the Commission invited township trustees to a focus group in October. Township trustees have a unique perspective on the needs of rural women.

Monroe County has eleven townships—representatives from five townships attended. The discussion during the focus group reiterated the four challenges that the county fair survey highlighted. In addition, trustees also brought up issues such as reliable transportation, rent control, and assistance with budgeting. The focus group spotlighted the importance of involving township trustees in any discussion of the needs of rural women. The Commission is reviewing the information from the focus group and investigating how the county can more effectively use input from this valuable resource.

Health Care and Resources for Rural Women

In 2014, the Commission sponsored a community forum on mental health care for women, which evolved into a forum on women's health care in general. The report from this forum was updated in 2015, placed on the MCWC website, and used as a basis for an extensive list of resources for rural women to address health care and other issues. A subcommittee on women's health care was formed to fur-

ther address the issues presented by the community forum and determine ways in which the Commission can help the county promote the resources that are available.

Promoting 2-1-1 as a Source for Women

Indiana 2-1-1 is a 24/7 service that helps residents of Indiana find the local resources they need. They provide local contacts for a wide range of services such as health, employment, food, and housing. In 2007, Bloomington helped advertise this resource. However, an informal poll by a Commission volunteer indicated that many people are not aware of this service. In 2015, the Commission set out to learn more about the service and the potential of working with the county to promote the service and raise awareness. A presentation by a staff member of 2-1-1 is scheduled for 2016.

Fair Labor Standards Act and Raising the Minimum Wage

Bloomington's Fair Labor Initiative encouraged local restaurants to comply with fair labor practices and provided display decals for business owners who signed a compliance agreement. The Commission published a letter in the *Herald-Times* supporting this effort.

The Commission has been actively following efforts to raise the minimum wage, attending forums and other activities. The current minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour does not reflect current productivity and cannot provide for the needs of a family. A presentation by Indiana Senator Mark Stoops outlined the legislative efforts, which for the most part, have not been successful. Senator Stoops urged the Commission to establish person-to-person contacts with legislators to help get this legislative topic to committee. The Commission is considering how best to connect with legislators regarding raising the minimum wage.

Effects of IU Study on Sexual Assault

Carol McCord, IU Associate Dean of Students, and Leslie Fasone, IU Assistant Dean of Students of Women's and Gender Affairs, presented to the Commission a review of the 2015 IU sexual assault climate survey and the IU programs on sexual violence. One of the surprising findings to come out of this and other studies is that sexual violence does not increase as girls become adults and attend college. It is a serious problem in younger girls and remains the same as they get older. According to the speakers, Indiana has second highest rate of sexual assault involving grades 9 through 12 in the U.S. One of the continuing discussion points was how to apply what was learned to younger girls in the local area. A subcommittee was formed to further explore this area.

Collaboration with Other Women's Commission/Groups and with Legislators

During activities in 2015 and particularly during Senator Stoops's presentation, several problems became apparent for all groups addressing women's issues: 1) Much more collaboration is needed. We need to know what others are doing and where they have been successful. 2) A direct connection between individual women, groups addressing women's issues, and legislators is needed in order to progress.

Plans for 2016 include exploring the efforts of the Indiana Commission for Women and the National Association of Commissions for Women as well as seeking to increase collaboration with the City of Bloomington Commission on the Status of Women. In addition, based on Senator Stoops's comments, the Commission will be investigating how best to encourage a connection between individual women and their legislators...how to help them "tell their stories."

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