

Voices of Maryland Women Conference Report of the Listening Tour and Survey

August 18, 2018

Notre Dame of Maryland University



On a warm Saturday morning in August, more than 100 individuals gathered on the beautiful campus of Notre Dame of Maryland University (NDMU) in Baltimore City. They traveled from across the state – as far away as Garrett County in the far western panhandle and Caroline County on the eastern shore – for a briefing on the report of the Maryland Commission for Women’s Voices of Maryland Women Listening Tour and Survey initiative.

The Maryland Commission for Women (MCW) is a 25-member advisory board established by state law in 1971, and charged with the responsibility of advising the Governor and the state legislature on the issues of concern to the women of Maryland.

The Commission launched its Voices of Maryland Women Listening Tour in July 2016 and traveled more than 3000 miles across the state over the next two years conducting a series of 19 public forums inviting women to "talk to us" about the challenges they face in their everyday lives. During this time, the Commission also conducted an on-line survey, in four languages, so that women who could not get to the forums could still lend their voices to the project.

The goals of this initiative were to:

- Assess the needs of women across Maryland’s diverse regions
- Identify and define challenges facing the women of our state
- Strengthen collaboration with and among local women’s groups, service providers and county Commissions for Women
- Develop an action plan to address identified issues

More than 1400 women lent their voices to this initiative. The forums attracted 723 Maryland residents and another 684 completed online surveys. Listening sessions were held in collaboration with each of the 14 county Commissions for Women across the state. At each public forum, the participants identified what they considered to be the "top five" challenges facing women in their jurisdictions. The result is a report outlining the "top five" issues identified by Maryland women state-wide and steps they thought would help address those issues in their communities.

The August 18, 2018 conference was designed to release the report and to discuss further how county Commissions for Women and others may address the challenges identified.

The conference was opened by Delegate Mary Washington who welcomed the conferees to Maryland Legislative District 43 and brought greetings from the city of Baltimore and from the Maryland General Assembly. She eloquently urged the attendees to think and act inclusively as they address the issues under consideration at the conference.



Notre Dame's president, Dr. Marylou Yam, welcomed all those in attendance to the University's campus and described its rich history of encouraging and supporting women's education and the movement toward greater equality.

Maryland Commission for Women Chair Yun Jung Yang, who led the Voices of Maryland Women initiative, and Commissioner Ummu Bradley Thomas presented a detailed briefing on the project and the report of its findings, including the "top five" issues identified by the women across the state who participated.



MCW Vice Chair Tawanda Bailey moderated a panel discussion, with an expert on each of the top five issues, including:



- Dr. Inga James, President and Executive Director, Heartly House in Frederick and President, Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence Board of Directors
- Sulma Guzmán, Esq., Workplace Justice Project, the Public Justice Center in Baltimore
- Kim Burton, Director, Older Adults Programs, Mental Health Association of Maryland
- Major General Linda Singh, Adjutant General, Maryland National Guard
- Margaret Williams, Executive Director, Maryland Family Network

Following the briefing and panel presentations, the conferees divided into "Table Top Discussions" on each of the five issues. At each table, in addition to the panelist on that topic, an "issue expert" joined the conversation. Issue experts included:

- Dr. Marylou Yam, President, NDMU
- Laura Jessick, SAFE/SART Policy Advocate at the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- Nikki Thompson, Senior Policy Advocate at the Job Opportunities Task Force
- Dr. Anne Lin, Dean of the School of Pharmacy, NDMU



- Joan Webb Scornaienchi, Executive Director, HC DrugFree
- Michael Cohen, President of the Maryland Legislative Agenda for Women
- Christina Peusch, Executive Director of the Maryland State Child Care Association



The Table Top discussants were asked to consider the “top five issues” identified in the report and covered in the panel discussion, and to develop lists of actions that each of the participants might undertake to address that issue in her or his own community or organization. Commissioner Tamara Wilson moderated the reports to the full conference of the strategies they identified:

Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

1. Advocate better laws to protect victims: actively support the re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VOWA)
2. Insist that Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE) Kits be available in every jurisdiction and at every hospital, throughout the state
3. Recognize and define what is meant by domestic violence and sexual assault
 - Use education to break the cultural link to violence against women
 - Work to develop culturally specific programs
 - Ensure that both women and men are educated on this issue
 - Acknowledge and work to eliminate the stigma associated with domestic violence and sexual assault
4. Support the provision of more crisis intervention and prevention services
 - Encourage more funding for advocates, lawyers and safe houses for survivors
 - Advocate free legal counsel regarding divorce and child custody for survivors
5. Ask for more research on this issue



Paid Time Off

1. Develop programs that provide workers information about existing laws to encourage wider usage
2. Provide information and trainings for employers to ensure effective implementation of current laws and policies
3. Recognize employers and showcase CEOs who are implementing women-friendly programs (i.e., best places to work awards and/or certifications)
4. Advocate expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to provide paid leave (Commissions could lead effort as a priority on their legislative agenda)
5. Review the Maryland 2018 Family and Medical Leave Insurance (FAMLI) Task Force Report to determine next steps for implementation



Women and Drug Abuse or Addictions

1. Demand training for medical professionals on appropriate pain management strategies for both physical and emotional pain
2. Advocate treatment and recovery services that are appropriate for women with children
3. Campaign for rehabilitation services for pregnant women and their newborn babies
4. Ask for more funding for rehabilitation services and more training for service providers
5. Promote the treatment of addiction as a health issue, not a crime, including:
 - Addressing the mental and emotional pain that leads to substance abuse and addiction
 - Enhancing “drug court” by offering graduates affordable counseling
 - Encouraging programs like “Not My Child” and other proven effective services



Too Few Women in Leadership Positions

1. Develop mentorship and sponsorship initiatives for women and girls, such as:
 - “Find One/Be One” or “Mentor Maryland”
 - Student members of Commissions for Women and other boards
2. Build leadership programs into middle and high school curriculum that provide real-world skills and encourage girls to advance in corporate, public and academic careers.
3. Promote professional development that encourages women leaders in the corporate world as well as in politics
4. Actively expand inclusive networking opportunities
5. Encourage women to see themselves as leaders



Access to Affordable, Quality Child Care

1. Support increased funding for child care services
2. Encourage child care facilities on college campuses for both faculty and students; include internships for students preparing for careers in early childhood education
3. Advocate incentives that encourage organizations and businesses to provide their employees with on-site child care for ages 0 – 4 years
4. Propose that new construction of office buildings includes space for on-site child care facilities
5. Educate the community on the importance of child care



Delegate Trent Kittleman congratulated the conferees on the meaningful discussions and insightful recommendations. She mentioned the importance of working across political party lines on issues of common concern and described the work of the Caucus of Maryland Women Legislators. She invited the conferees to be in touch with the Caucus and with individual legislators to continue to advance these proposals.



Speaker Pro-Tem of the Maryland House of Delegates Adrienne Jones closed the conference with an inspiring call to action. She advised the attendees not to be complacent, that it is not enough to attend a conference like this one. It is important to put into action the strategies discussed today. She encouraged the participants to contact their legislators, to work to support these proposals, and to take the lead in advocating for Maryland's women and girls.



