

Vermont Commission on Women FY2027 Governor's proposed state budget
House Committee on Appropriations
February 4, 2026
Cary Brown, Executive Director, Vermont Commission on Women

Department Overview

The Vermont Commission on Women is an independent, non-partisan state agency dedicated to advancing rights and opportunities for women in Vermont and gender equity for all. The Commission:

- advises and consults with the legislative and executive branches of state government on policies affecting the status of women in Vermont;
- conducts research and study of issues affecting the status of women in Vermont;
- educates and informs business, education, state and local governments and the general public about the nature and scope of sex discrimination and other matters affecting the status of women in Vermont; and
- serves as a liaison and clearinghouse between government, private interest groups and the general public concerned with services for women.

The Commission consists of 16 commissioners¹, appointed by multiple appointing authorities, and drawn from throughout the state from diverse backgrounds. An Advisory Council, representing 29 partnership organizations, provides information and assists the Commission.

The Commission is staffed by an Executive Director, a Policy & Research Analyst/Business Manager, and a Communications, Outreach, & Program Coordinator.

Key Activities

Our work falls roughly into the categories of public education, policy, and an information and referral service.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

The **Vermont Equal Pay Compact** is a voluntary pledge that employers make to indicate their commitment to taking steps to close the gender wage gap. Close to 200 employers have signed on. These employers are encouraged to take steps that expand beyond simply paying their employees fairly, such as changing their recruiting practices to encourage more women to apply for STEM jobs.

We have implemented **Equal Pay public education campaigns** during the month of March for the last few years. This has included an educational video, an op-ed, social media spotlights on Equal Pay Compact employers as well as our advisory partners working on pay equity, a one-pager informational

¹ Esther Charlestin, Chair (South Burlington), Stefanie Argus (Brattleboro), Hazel Brewster (Fayston), Alex Hilliard (Poultney), Kate Lucier (Underhill), Dr. Madeline Motta (central VT), Ashley Messier (Jericho), Karen Paul (Burlington), Sophia Rabe (Williston), Yanna Rhodes (Newport Center), Kelly-Rue Riso (Barre), Aleta Sprague (Dorset), Linda Joy Sullivan (Newport), Susan Sussman (Middlesex), Amanda Van Eps (Burlington).

publication, podcasts addressing pay disparities between white men and various demographics of women, such as women with disabilities, and multiple other forms of outreach.

This spring, for the second year, we will host an event we call **Pay Equity Café** in the statehouse in order to provide information and resources supporting pay equity. We partner with a number of other organizations, including Vermont Works for Women, the Vermont Women's Fund, the Paid Leave Coalition, the Alzheimer's Association, and the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence to meet with legislators and others in the state house cafeteria.

Our website **Workplaces For All** is a one-stop resource for information about sexual harassment and workplace discrimination. It includes comprehensive information about legal protections and responsibilities for both employers and employees, as well as resources for helping to cultivate a workplace climate that is welcoming and inclusive. In light of recent updates to Vermont law regarding workplace discrimination, we recently undertook a project to update that website as well as to create additional resources. We were able to take advantage of carry-forward funds to contract with an attorney with national expertise in employment and discrimination law, and we collaborated with the Human Rights Commission and the Civil Rights Unit of the Attorney General's Office.

Starting in 2024, we began hosting a series of **public forums** in different regions of the state, as well as online. We have held meetings in Waterbury, Rutland, Newport, Bennington, Brattleboro, and St Albans, in addition to online. The public forums are allowing us to renew existing connections as well as to introduce our work to more of the public. In the past year we've concentrated on returning to communities we've already visited, in order to follow up on some of the conversations and connections made. Tomorrow evening we will be hosting a community conversation in Johnson in collaboration with the organization Jenna's Promise, who focuses on supporting people with substance use disorder through treatment, housing, and workforce development.

Other **Public Education** efforts include addressing issues or publicizing current data through presentations and workshops to groups around Vermont; creation and distribution of educational publications; via media in interviews, articles and commentary; and on our social media channels. Recently we have done education to let people know about the changes that have been made to anti-discrimination laws, and collaborated with the Attorney General's Office and the Vermont Chamber of Commerce to present a webinar to educate employers about the law requiring wage transparency in job postings.

We have been fortunate to be able to continue a very strong partnership with Vermont Works for Women and the Vermont Women's Fund to research and publish data regarding women's economic status in Vermont. With funding from the Vermont Women's Fund and coordination by Vermont Works for Women, we have recently supported the publication of a spotlight report called **Women, Work, and Wages**, and will be following this up with a longer and more in-depth publication later this year. We have started presenting the findings of this report in various venues, and will be partnering with the Women's Legislative Caucus on February 18th to present a panel discussion on the data here in the state house.

POLICY

In our charge to advise and consult with the Executive and Legislative branches of state government, we provide **testimony on legislation** before the legislature. In this biennium some of our testimony has

been on PR4 (equal rights amendment to the VT constitution); a tax credit for unpaid caregivers; removing the “severe or pervasive” standard from our discrimination laws; flexible working arrangements; requiring wage transparency in job postings; and expanding access to the Vermont parental and family leave act.

Recently we submitted a memo to the Agency of Administration sharing **gender equity considerations for the Governor’s return-to-office mandate for state employees**. As a member of **the Governor’s Workforce Equity and Diversity Council** we provide equity guidance to the Department of Human Resources. In our membership on the Department of Corrections’ **Women’s Facility Stakeholders Group** we contribute policy and process recommendations.

We sit on numerous other **committees and in collaborations**, including the Department of Health’s Maternal Health Task Force; the Early Childhood Education policy working group; the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence; and the New England Women’s Policy Initiative.

In the fall of 2025 we presented at the **Vermont Human Rights Commission’s Civil Rights Summit**, and contributed to policy recommendations emerging from that summit.

INFORMATION & REFERRAL

Our **Information and Referral Service** efforts include:

- a **statewide events calendar** to serve as one centrally located source for any event focused on issues of concern to women
- our **VIEW** electronic newsletter
- a comprehensive update to our **Legal Rights of Women in Vermont** handbook
- **direct responses to inquiries** for help and information via phone and email
- **multiple publications, videos, and other resources** on our website

Key Budget Issues/Ups and Downs

- Approximately **83%** of the Commission's budget is for personal services, providing for 3.00 FTE staff positions
- Approximately **15%** is for allocated expenses such as fee-for-space, insurance and information technology
- Approximately **2%** covers all other operating expenses: commissioner travel reimbursement (mandated), staff travel, phone, printing/publications, postage, membership/registrations, copier maintenance fee, computer repair and maintenance