Our Mission
The Washington State Women’s Commission improves the life of every woman and girl by ensuring equitable opportunities and removing systemic barriers through engagement, advocacy, and public policy, while being inclusive of our diverse populations.

Statutory Authority
With bipartisan support and companion Senate Bill 6583, the legislature passed HB 2759 on March 15, 2018 because of the importance of achieving equal opportunity for all citizens. The legislature found that women face unique problems and needs. The development of public policy and the efficient delivery of governmental services to meet the needs of women is improved by the Women’s Commission being the focal point for the interests of women in state government.

Our Vision
Every woman and girl is healthy, safe, prosperous, and empowered to achieve their full potential.
It is long overdue to have a commission dedicated to improving the lives of women in Washington, the commission’s work is more important than ever. The commission is a valuable resource and provides recommendations and advice to my office, the Legislature and state agencies on issues important to all women.

The Commission is proud to be a voice for women and girls in Washington state. Our role: advocating on their behalf with the Governor, the Legislature and other public policymakers to ensure that every woman and girl is empowered to live her best life, free of barriers, violence and inequity. Together change is possible.

I am honored to serve as Chair of the Washington State Women’s Commission. The Commission is unapologetic about uplifting the voices, concerns, and issues of all women across Washington State, especially those that often are not heard, are overlooked, and under-represented.
Who We Are
Commissioners & Legislative Advisors

Michelle Merriweather | CHAIR
President & CEO, Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle

Graciela Gomez Cowger | PAST CHAIR
CEO, Schwabe Williamson & Wyatt

Rituja Indapure | VICE CHAIR
Manager, eCom Fulfillment, Costco

Quinn Dalan | SECRETARY
Executive Director, Yakima County Volunteer Attorney Services

Jackie Boschok
President, WA State Alliance for Retired Americans

Anna Franklin
Director of Clinical Effectiveness, Providence

Grace Huang
Director of Policy, Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence

Vicki Lowe
Executive Director, American Indian Health Commission for Washington State

Dawn Rains
Executive Vice President and Chief Policy and Strategy Officer, Treehouse

Past Commissioners: Tara Fairfield, Monica Holland

Representative Beth Doglio (D)
Representative Mary Dye (R)
Senator Lisa Wellman (D)
Senator Ann Rivers (R)
I raise up my voice-not to shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.

— Malala Yousafzai
The Washington State Women’s Commission recognizes that women and girls in Washington State face unique challenges.

This year, through the following areas, the Commission is focused on aiding women’s overall recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 which disproportionately affected women and girls at all ages and particularly negatively impacted women and girls of color.
Health

The pandemic has further exposed the health inequalities faced by women, particularly women of color. Living at the intersection of racial and gender inequities in the built environment and social determinants of health, women of color often experience disproportionately poor health outcomes across health measures.

The Commission is working toward ensuring women and girls can live healthier lives by addressing the growing disparities in health equity.

Issues of particular concern include healthcare access & affordability, quality of care, mental healthcare access, and maternal & child health.
Health

Maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in Washington

In their most recent Maternal Mortality Review (2019), the Department of Health identified 30 pregnancy-related deaths from 2014-16 in WA, and determined that 60% of those deaths were preventable.

Uninsured women in Washington between ages 19 and 44 in 2020.

There is an urgent need for better data, as racial and ethnic information needed to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on communities of color has been inconsistent, underreported, or misclassified.

As a result, women of color, who face the compounded harms and challenges of their intersectional identities, are especially likely to face amplified inequity as a result of the pandemic.

COVID-19 IMPACT

In response to COVID-19, U.S. women were more likely to report experiencing:

- 73% of health care workers infected with COVID-19 in the U.S. were women.
- Symptoms of anxiety/depressive disorder: 47% (women) vs. 38% (men)
- Worry and stress impacting mental health: 51% (women) vs. 34% (men)
- Major impact on mental health: 11% (women) vs. 6% (men)

Women are twice as likely to experience PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and depression in their lifetime than men.

Women in the U.S. have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year.

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Women and girls of all ages, income levels, racial and ethnic communities, sexual orientations, and gender identities continue to experience violence in the form of domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, trafficking, and gun violence.

The Commission is working with our community partners to find policy and practical solutions to these serious issues to help prevent violence, provide adequate services for survivors and eradicate all forms of gender-based violence.
Safety

On September 10, 2020, as part of a 24-hour survey conducted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), 51 domestic violence programs in Washington State fielded 541 hotline contacts, averaging 23 per hour.

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) women (84.3%) in the U.S. have experienced violence in their lifetime. Overall, more than 1.5 million AIAN women have experienced violence in their lifetime.

Washington State ranks second in the nation in highest number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons cases. Although 1.9% of the state population is Indigenous, Indigenous persons make up 6% of the state’s active missing persons reports. The actual number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is likely much higher, as Indigenous persons are often inaccurately reported, underreported, and misclassified in law enforcement databases and media.

As many as 83% of women in Washington State with developmental disabilities have been victims of sexual assault.

Prevalence of rape and sexual assault by race/ethnicity, in Washington State.

*AAPI (Asian American, Pacific Islander)

AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native)

In the NNEDV’s 24-hour survey, 603 victim requests for services (including emergency shelter, housing, transportation, childcare, and legal representation) remained unmet because programs lacked the resources to meet their needs. 62% of these unmet requests were for housing or emergency shelter.

Access to a gun makes it five times more likely that a women in the U.S. will die at the hands of a domestic abuser.

4.5 million women in the U.S. have reported being threatened with a gun by an intimate partner. Every month, an average of 57 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline found that one in three hotline callers in the first half of 2020 experienced economic abuse.

The economic impact of COVID-19 further endangered survivors who were often trapped with abusive partners without resources to leave and with reduced access to supports like shelter and civil courts.

Survivors reported that abusive partners had used pandemic restrictions to prevent them from seeing family, including their children. Widespread closures made it more difficult for survivors to reach out for help and connection.

COVID-19 IMPACT
Economic Security

Women and girls in Washington deserve financial stability. Access to financial assistance, affordable housing, quality childcare, and food security are foundational to the wellbeing of women, their families, and their communities.

The Women's Commission is committed to removing barriers for low income women, especially those who have caregiving responsibilities, and to investing in infrastructure that lifts women and their families out of poverty.
Economic Security

**10.9%**
Women in Washington State between ages 18 - 64 were living at or below the federal poverty level in 2019.

**26%**
of more than 274,000 households that are headed by women in WA State live at or below the federal poverty level.

**49.3%**
In 2017, of the 311,716 women and children in Washington State eligible for the WIC program, only 49.3% participated.

**52%**
Only 52% of eligible children accessed Washington State’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) or Head Start in 2019. Children in families living at or below 110% of the federal poverty line are eligible for ECEAP and federal programs like Early Head Start and Head Start.

**157,461**
There is a deficit of 157,461 rental homes in WA State that are affordable and available to extremely low income renters, despite making up 21% of renter households.

Only 33% of eligible children accessed Washington State’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) or Head Start in 2019. Children in families living at or below 110% of the federal poverty line are eligible for ECEAP and federal programs like Early Head Start and Head Start.

**4 in 10**
low income people in WA State are homeless or pay over half or more of their income towards rent.

According to 2019 Washington data, about 21% of American Indian and Alaskan Natives are living at or below the federal poverty threshold; 16.3% of African Americans; and 16% of Hispanic/Latinxs.

**COVID-19 IMPACT**

**25%**
of women in Washington who became unemployed during the pandemic reported the job loss was due to a lack of childcare, twice the rate of men surveyed from May and June 2020.

**6 in 10**
children in Washington State were without access to care at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Single mothers in WA State living below the federal poverty level, 2019

*AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native)
Economic Opportunity

Equal pay, digital equity, and access to employment and leadership opportunities are essential to women's economic advancement.

As providers, caretakers, and essential drivers of our state's economy, women should be empowered to participate and advance in the workforce free from the barriers that women, and especially women of color, have historically faced.

The Commission is committed to advocating for policies that empower women in the workplace and to creating more equitable environments in which women can thrive.
**Economic Opportunity**

**34th**

Washington State’s rank in the nation in gender pay parity, with women on average making 22% less in their annual earnings than men.

**78.2¢**

The amount women make for every dollar that a white man makes. The gender pay gap in Washington State has widened since 2014, when it was 81¢ per dollar.

**2071**

The year which the gender wage gap will close in Washington State, at the current rate of progress.

A key aspect to education access and economic opportunity for women, girls, and their families is closing the digital equity gap.

Low-income and Black populations in Washington face disproportionate barriers to accessing tech equipment and the internet in their homes.

In Washington State, a computer is rarely or never available for a child’s educational use for 59% of households experiencing poverty.

**COVID-19 IMPACT**

**Unemployment Rates**

For Women, by race and Hispanic/Latina ethnicity in Washington

- **Latina Women**
- **Black Women**
- **Asian Women**
- **White Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>Latina Women</th>
<th>Black Women</th>
<th>Asian Women</th>
<th>White Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4 (2019)</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>63%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q4 (2020)</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 (2021)</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4x** more women than men dropped out of the U.S. workforce in September 2020.

**5%** predicted increase in wage gap after pandemic recession.

*AIAN (American Indian, Alaskan Native)
Our Approach

Advocating for women and girls.

What We Do

The Washington State Women’s Commission approaches our four key issue areas through the following efforts.

- Legislative Advocacy
- Information Gathering/Research
- Public & Private Partnerships
- Community Outreach
- Resource Referral

How We Do It

We accomplish this through four committees which focus on the following issues:

**Health Committee**
- COVID-19 Pandemic Response
- Health Disparities
- Maternal and Child Health Disparities
- Mental health Access

**Safety Committee**
- Domestic Violence
- Sexual Assault
- Sexual Harassment
- Trafficking
- Gun Violence

**Economic Security Committee**
- Poverty
- Childcare Access and Affordability
- Affordable Housing

**Economic Opportunity Committee**
- Pay Equity
- Living Wage Career Pathways
- Digital Equity
- Alternative Workplace Options
- Leadership and Mentorship Opportunities
A New Listening Forum Series

A new series providing valuable insight into the unique challenges faced by women, especially by women of color, across Washington.

In response to the disproportionate impact COVID-19 had on women, including the resulting ‘she-cession’ that saw the mass departure of women from the workforce, the Washington State Women’s Commission hosted a virtual Listening Forum in March of 2021.

This open format Forum allowed Commissioners and Staff to hear directly from women across the state about their experiences during the pandemic and how it impacted their lives and work.

Key Findings

- Women left the workplace due to lack of childcare.
- Women and families faced job and health insurance loss.
- Small business owners, including undocumented entrepreneurs and gig workers, struggled to keep their businesses afloat.
- Working women, particularly those with children, struggled to maintain work/life balance.
- Victims of domestic violence experienced economic instability and a lack of social support while often being trapped with their abusers.
- Women experienced increased rates of depression, substance misuse, and other mental health concerns.
- Access to relief funding was delayed, particularly within communities of color, to immigrants, and to refugees.
- The pandemic illuminated existing societal disparities, particularly around issues of racism.
- Families were helped by cash assistance, increased food assistance, and childcare relief grants.
- As much of the workforce shifted to digital communications, the digital equity divide grew larger and the importance of technology & broadband access for all Washingtonians became more apparent.

[As a small business], we help our economy run. We support so many other small businesses, since we source all of our grapes from small growers in Washington state. Our accountant, our insurance, our glass provider, our boxes to ship- all of our sources are small businesses here in Washington state. So certainly this type of public crisis has really hit small businesses very hard.
- Emily Fergestrom
  Owner, Fortuity Cellars

Art is essential. Art is not just something that you put on as entertainment...What we saw during COVID, was the fact that gig workers and solo entrepreneurs and artists...there aren't any mechanisms to really help them if they don't have a gig. We really had to fight for unemployment for them, and we really had to fight because some of them don't have health care.
- Sharon Williams
  Executive Director,
  Central District Art Forum

We started holding these drop-in community circles on Zoom...and there were such outpourings of grief. The layers, the intersection of all these systems, of all these different pains. [The virus] was able to just reveal all these existing schisms, all these existing gaps.
- Dashni Amin
  Program Coordinator,
  Collective Justice NW
Model Policies for Sexual Harassment

All women in Washington deserve a safe work environment, but some small business employers lack the resources to appropriately address the issue of sexual harrassment in the workplace. The Women's Commission worked with pro bono employment attorneys of Gordon Rees’ Seattle office to develop a model sexual harassment policy intended for small employers who may not have a Human Resources department. The Model Policies are available in seven languages on the Women's Commission website at wswc.wa.gov/resources.

Women on Corporate Boards

A measure of economic parity is equitable gender representation on corporate boards. As part of its legislative mandate the Commission provided guidance to the legislature on best practices related to the issue of women on corporate boards. The Commission then championed Senate bill 5142 revising the Washington business corporation act to increase equitable gender representation on corporate boards. Working with the Secretary of State the Commission is charged with monitoring the progress of implementation of publicly traded companies headquartered in Washington.

Fair Start For Kids Act

Childcare and early learning programs are essential for working women and for our state’s economic future. The COVID-19 pandemic escalated already existing barriers to women’s economic participation. The Commission was a proud supporter of the landmark "Fair Start for Kids Act signed into law by Governor Inslee on May 7, 2021. The new law will help build a better childcare system for workers, families and the whole state of Washington.

Key 2021 Legislative Priorities

Each year the Commission crafts a legislative agenda focused on education and advocacy on issues aligned with our strategic framework with the input of our commissioners, legislative partners, and Commission staff. This year, the Commission focused on aiding women’s overall recovery from the COVID-19 impacts, which affected women and girls of all ages, with disproportionate negative impacts on women and girls of color.

- COVID-19 Response - Digital Equity - Protection Order Streamlining
- Childcare Reform - Career Pathways - Maternal and Mental Health
Investing in the Women's Commission and the women and girls of Washington.

**Recommended Solutions***

- Invest in prevention-based responses to violence against women.
- Create policies that help women return to the workforce with protections; provide opportunities and innovative infrastructure for success.
- Support workplace policy and initiatives ensuring access to reliable, fast, and affordable broadband across state.
- Ensure workforce training and career pathway opportunities for those displaced by jobs made obsolete by the COVID-19 pandemic and an evolving economy.
- Continue investment in affordable childcare and early education as infrastructure to support a robust economy.
- Strengthen and enforce protections against discrimination, harassment, and retaliation, which disproportionately impact women and people of color.
- Create legislation enabling women to work from home (where reasonably possible) for up to six months after the birth/adoption of an infant/child.
- Fully fund community partners from marginalized communities who provide services within communities – including home visiting.
- Provide additional funding for teacher training and inclusion of cultural considerations as outlined in the Healthy Youth Act.
- Follow and fund recommendations in the 2021 Gender Justice Study.
- Build and sustain strong safety net support systems including investment in affordable housing and shelter.
- Continue support for Governor Inslee’s affordable housing and homelessness priorities.
- Continue coordination between state and federal legislators to maximize federal investment in Washington.

*Additional information regarding the above recommended solutions can be found online at wswc.wa.gov.*

**Budgetary Reporting**

Total Budget: $244,055

- **80%** Staffing**
- **10%** Facilities, IT and Legal Services
- **8%** Commissioner and Community Outreach Travel
- **2%** Supplies, Misc

** The Commission is currently staffed by two and is requesting a 3rd staffer in the next biennium budget.