



Guide to Starting a Local Commission



WHY START A LOCAL WOMEN'S COMMISSION?

A local commission is a way to ensure that women are always at the table for local government discussion.

A local commission convenes key players in the non-profit community for a collaborative approach to addressing the issues of women and girls in the community which includes reviewing local laws and policy making for its impact on women and children, and advising local law makers.

Local commission's work best when they are thoughtfully tailored to meet the needs of the community but the mission of any women's commission is to advocate for the general welfare of women by enhancing awareness of women-centered issues. Women's commissions are typically advisory in nature, so they research and advice local governments and community organizations.

ESTABLISHING A COMMISSION

Commission Models

The first step to establishing a commission is to decide what level of government will be the most appropriate platform for the causes to be addressed by the commission. Commissions can be established on the city, county and state levels depending on the group of women which will benefit from the commission's efforts.

Furthermore there are different models for establishing commissions which differ slightly in terms of organization, based on how they are formed:

1. At the State level a commission is established by an executive order, legislative order, or with a statute. Commissioners have final authority and staff members report to the commissioners.
2. At the city or county level a commission can be created through an ordinance. Many more established commissions listed on the women.ca.gov website have their ordinances on their websites for reference. (For the purposes of this document, we focus on this model)
3. A commission can also be established as a non-profit advocacy group in the community and remain unaffiliated with any government.

Getting Community Buy-In

Whether a commission is established with an executive order, legislative order, city or county ordinance or non-profit charter, creating personal connections with elected officials and key community leaders is the most effective way to gain support for your commission. Speak directly with local politicians and demonstrate how the community will benefit from a women's commission and what specific issues need to be addressed.

Before you begin this leg work, it will be helpful to draft a clear, concise mission statement which can be shared with elected officials and supporters. It will also be important to stay in touch with any contacts that have been made in the government.

When it is time to select commissioners, the appointing authorities will want to have an idea of the commission's work and future goals in order to better select commissioners who fit well with the mission. Appointment duties can be the responsibility of one elected official, such as the mayor, can be divided among multiple individuals including city councilmembers or women's caucuses.

Finally, it is strongly recommended that the commission's funding or funding opportunity is secured/identified before its creation. Though it is possible to function exclusively on fundraising, commissions which receive the government's financial backing are better equipped to implement projects and programs because of their guaranteed resources. Additionally, a fixed budget will provide the funds to hire permanent staff members who will be an invaluable resource to the organization.

Selecting and Training Your Commissioners

The specific number of commissioners and corresponding appointing authorities should be described in the commission's charter/ordinance. After the ordinance has been enacted the appointing authorities or establishing body should solicit applications from potential commissioners. Once the applications have been received it is the appointing authorities' responsibility to review the candidates and appoint the appropriate number of commissioners. The commissioners can then officially be sworn in, an event which also presents an important opportunity to generate press about the new commission.

Training the newly appointed commissioners will also be an important part of the establishment process. When planning a commissioner orientation remember to emphasize themes such as leadership skills, team building, communication, and the respectful and sensitive treatment of all members and issues addressed by the commission.

Provide everyone with a new commissioner manual, which will also serve as a guide for the orientation. The manual should cover, at a minimum, the following topics to ensure that all new commissioners understand their roles and responsibilities to the commission:

1. Overview of the commission and mission statement
2. History
3. Legislation (establishing act and bylaws)
4. Commission structure
5. Commissioner and appointing authorities contact information
6. Swearing-in policy
7. Calendar and meeting schedule
8. Registration and commitment forms
9. Budget and reimbursement policies
10. Office organization and procedures
11. Program and event planning

If it is not included in the establishing charter/ordinance, create a membership policy to discuss at the new commissioner orientation. Successful membership policies pay attention to the length of service, reappointment procedures, and measures for the rotation of commissioners and committees, and commissioner evaluation.

These policies will ensure that commissioners clearly understand their responsibilities to the organization and the weight carried by their appointments. Orientation also presents a good opportunity to gather basic information for each commissioner's file. Ask the commissioners to bring a resume or a curriculum vitae, and if these are unavailable create a form to get information about each commissioner's educational background, volunteer positions, civic involvement, professional experience, special interests and skills, and contact information.

By-Laws

One of the first tasks for a new commission is to draft a set of by-laws, which are the codes and regulations by which the commission will be governed. Researching examples of by-laws in a local library or on the internet will help commissioners to begin thinking about how to draft a new set of by-laws. Be sure to consider the following themes when discussing the by-laws with the commission:

1. Authority and leadership positions
2. Definition and process of membership
3. Officers, staff and committees
4. Structure and frequency of meetings
5. Budget
6. Processes to amend the bylaws

If possible, seek legal counsel and receive the approval of all commissioners before officially accepting your by-laws. Furthermore, the by-laws are a living document and should be reviewed regularly to ensure they are still consistent with the commission's vision and goals.

Commission Structure

Different leadership positions and committees exist within each commission to distribute responsibilities between commissioners and staff members.

Officers

One of the commission's first responsibilities as a new organization will be to elect commission officers. The positions typically created include chair, vice-chair, treasurer and secretary, and the length of the term to be served should be predetermined by the commission. It is also important to consider the candidates' leadership qualities and commitment to the organization. Officers should also be willing to take on responsibilities, exercise authority, help with the long and short term planning of the commission, organize the efforts of others, and communicate effectively. Should an

officer fail to fulfill these requirements, create a standard procedure for removing and replacing that officer. Clearly explaining the expectations and responsibilities of each position should prevent the need to dismiss any commissioners in a leadership position.

Staff

If the commission is supported by permanent funding, an operating budget should be created which will be managed by the executive director. In addition to overseeing the budget the executive director may also contribute to strategic planning, coordinate commission events, supervise other hired staff or volunteers working in the office, organize and participate in advocacy efforts, and schedule the commission's meetings.

Interns and Volunteers

Interns and volunteers are an excellent resource and allow for connections to be created between the commissioners and other women in the community. Having interns work alongside the executive director, staff and commissioners will help to develop the interns' understanding of women's issues and provide a platform to address these issues directly. Interns can be undergraduate, graduate or post-graduate students who come from a variety of academic backgrounds to contribute to the overall mission of the commission. Volunteers are also an important part of the commission's workforce, particularly for their ability to contribute to the commission on an ad hoc basis and act as liaisons between the commission and the women they serve. Even if volunteers have not been appointed as commissioners, include their perspective by inviting them to serve on a planning committee or help with some of the commission's events.

Committees

Creating committees to carry out specific projects may help the commission to run more smoothly and efficiently. Commissioners should join committees based on the specific skills or interests they have to ensure that everyone in the committee is passionate about furthering the same cause. We suggest the creation of the following committees:

1. Budget and Finance
2. Legislative
3. Outreach and Education
4. Communication
5. Advocacy and Special Events
6. Projects and Planning

Working in smaller groups also allows commissioners to cultivate their leadership skills, which can be useful for developing future officers and can make each member of the commission feel as if she or he is contributing directly to the organization. Committee meetings also provide an informal environment for brainstorming creative ideas and solutions to problems faced by the commission and allow commissioners to work as a team for the betterment of the commission specifically and women in general.

ISSUE IDENTIFICATION AND ADVOCACY

Identifying Issues: Public Hearings

To make the commission's advocacy work as effective as possible, identify issues which specifically affect women in the community. Holding a public hearing is an excellent way to gain a better understanding of the real obstacles currently confronted by women. These meetings are open to the public and provide individuals with the opportunity to share their concerns with the commission.

Begin planning a few months in advance by securing a location large enough to accommodate the anticipated audience and, if possible, find a space in which the hearing can be held free of charge. Reach out to a variety of individuals and organizations who you would like to see attend the hearing, and consider contacting local organizations, municipal legislators, the commission's appointing authorities, and those who have volunteered with the commission in the past. Send letters to these contacts and post flyers around the town or city in which the hearing will be held, keeping track of the total cost for mailings and flyers. Legislators should be contacted with a phone call a few weeks after the letters are mailed to remind them about the hearing.

In addition to individual contacts, make the event known to a larger audience through local media such as newspapers, radio, and cable access stations. Alert these media outlets of the time, date and location of the hearing by writing a media advisory, press release, or public service announcement and distributing it two weeks before the hearing. Create a flyer to include with the mailing and to post around the community, making sure it is simply designed, easy to read, and contains all the necessary information about the date, time, location and theme of the hearing. And, if there is a budget for advertising, consider creating ads for the main newspaper in each city or town to be served by the hearing

Also take into account that some cities or towns will have multilingual populations and ads should be translated into those different languages to reach as large of an audience as possible. Additionally, it is worth finding translators to speak at the hearing. Communicate with the contact person at the hearing location to find out more information about the different languages spoken in the region and to see if she or he has any suggestions for places to find translators.

Confirm ahead of time if there is an audio system at the location and, if not, leave enough time to obtain one before the hearing. The entire hearing should be recorded and transcribed for the hearing report, so it is important that the appropriate equipment is available. When the day of the hearing arrives, set up a long table at the front of the room for the commissioners and a smaller table or desk facing the commissioners for those testifying, plus rows of chairs for the audience. Have a sign-in table at the location's entrance, and make sure to add the attendee's names to a contact list later on so they can be informed of future hearings or events in their area.

During the hearing, invite community members to testify before the commissioners and to share their issues or concerns about the status of women in their community, encouraging women from all backgrounds to share their stories to create a dialogue which includes the entire audience. Before attendees leave the hearing, distribute a survey to get feedback about the meeting and to provide women with an opportunity to inform the commission of any issues about which they were not able to testify. After the hearing has finished, combine the survey results and the 19 transcript of the meeting in the hearing report. Additionally, look for any mention of the hearing in local media and contact newspapers which published stories about the hearing and request a copy of the article or print a copy from the newspaper's website.

Send thank you letters to the contact person at the hearing location and to any legislators who attended the event. Within a month of the hearing distribute a hearing report to all attendees, legislators, and other individuals who could benefit from the information learned during the course of the hearing. Public hearings can take a significant amount of planning but done over the course of a few months it is a very manageable process and is a deeply rewarding event when the commission can hear directly from its constituents about the most pertinent issues in their lives.

Advocacy Efforts

It is recommended that the commission organizes an advocacy training session for all commissioners, especially those interested in lobbying on behalf of the commission. Begin with a clear explanation of the overall structure of the legislature including the

different leadership positions and the current legislators. Consider bringing in a speaker to advocacy training session who has lobbying experience or a legislator who can share her or his best practices for effective lobbying.

In short, good lobbying comes from familiarity with the legislators and having a clear understanding of the issues at hand. Try to see legislators as allies and enter with the mindset that the commission will be working with, rather than against, her or him. Know her or his past stance on important issues and make sure to follow up with any legislators after a visit. When a legislator takes positive action on the commission's behalf, be sure to thank her or him for supporting the organization.

Another way to strengthen advocacy efforts is to bring together various women's groups to form a coalition which can advocate for women's issues addressed by the commission. Creating a directory of women's organizations to build a network of friends and advocates increases the commission's ability to take action and will provide potential contacts for the caucus. Once a coalition has been established task forces can be created to plan specific actions for the issues on which the commission would like to focus, remembering that sometimes it is better to focus on a smaller, more manageable portion of a larger issue which should be addressed over the course of months or years.

Utilizing the Political System

It is important to understand the political system of the area your commission will be serving so it can be used as much to the commission's advantage as possible.

Familiarize staff and commissioners with the local lawmakers and attend events at which they will be speaking, such as candidate nights or forums, to learn about their stances on women's issues. Send elected officials questions ahead of time so they can research the issues the commission feels are most pressing for women in the area.

PROMOTING YOUR COMMISSION

Spearheading a Public Relations Campaign

The key to a successful public relations campaign is to understand the audience. Targeting a specific demographic will elicit a larger and more positive response, resulting in greater support for the commission. Consider an approach which utilizes different kinds of media to reach the greatest number of people possible.

Consider reaching out to publications which serve special interest groups such as the League of Women Voters, university publications, community groups, and veterans' organizations. Though these publications are small they generally have a strong readership and result in motivated supporters of the commission. Remember that the commission should function as a non-partisan organization which acts in the public's best interest, an approach which will prevent your commission from being too polarizing or making certain members of your audience feel excluded.

Major commission events, such as fundraisers or the induction of new commissioners, will make for the most newsworthy stories. The tone of the story should appropriately reflect the nature of the news source, and if a piece is intended as an exclusive do not offer it to more than one news source. Alert the media early enough so they will time the release of your story to coincide with the event. Prepare a detailed fact sheet, media alert, or press release to distribute to media personnel and agree to be quoted if appropriate.

Websites and Social Media

Creating an informational, easy-to-navigate website is one of the most important resources for those trying to learn about the work performed by the commission. The ubiquity of the internet means a well-planned website is now more important than ever and will create connections with a far wider audience than any newspaper or television show possibly could. The website should include basic information about the commission, links to other local women's commissions, basic facts about the legislation supported by the commission, a calendar with information about upcoming events and recent publications, especially annual reports.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are also an effective way to connect with potential supporters. A Facebook page or profile will help the commission to establish a more permanent internet presence and provides the

opportunity to record the organization's mission, post pictures, create links to events, and provide updates to other users who view the page. Twitter is more effective for the dissemination of brief announcements or reminders for upcoming events. LinkedIn is similar to Facebook in that it allows the commission to connect with other users, but these interactions emphasize networking and professional interactions rather than the more informal information usually posted on Facebook.

Maintaining a blog is another method of promoting the commission but with greater freedom than the rigid templates of social media platforms. The ability to self-publish in the format of a blog allows for contributions from staff members, commissioners and interns, in addition to providing the flexibility to write posts ranging from summaries of commission events to op-ed style pieces about the status of women in the community.

Speakers Bureau

If there are commissioners who enjoy public speaking and would like to donate their time outside of commission meetings, creating a speakers bureau is an excellent way to utilize their talents. Speakers should be well-versed in a few predetermined topics, such as the history of the commission and the most current women's issues, and should be prepared to provide informational talks about these topics when requested to do so. Send a brochure detailing the various topics and the names of the speakers to local and government organizations which might be interested in the topics which will be addressed by the commissioners.

Collateral

Compile a collection of pamphlets and brochures discussing the different causes supported by the commission, the commission's history, and the key pieces of legislation the commission hopes to see passed in the near future. Keep this collateral on hand at any events hosted by the commission and in the office to distribute to visitors. It might also be useful to gather collateral from other women's commissions such as the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor or other similar organizations which might have already put together resources concerning topics of interest for the commission and its constituents.

EVALUATING YOUR COMMISSION

Once the commission has established a presence it is important to take a step back and evaluate how effectively the commission is addressing the needs of women in the community. Yearly evaluations are a good measure of the commission's progress as well as the improvements which need to be made in the future. Furthermore, keeping records of the commission's yearly progress will allow future commissioners to understand the organization's history and how it can be strengthened to serve even more women. The following two sections describe important methods of evaluation which every commission should undertake for a comprehensive review of its work.

DRAFT

This document was created by the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls with guidance from the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women and Girls and the National Association of Commissions for Women.