

Connecticut General Assembly



PCSW

Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

The State's leading force for women's equality

News Release

18-20 Trinity St., Hartford, CT 06106 • 860/240-8300 • pcsw@cga.ct.gov • www.cga.ct.gov/pcsw/

CONTACT: Christine Palm, Communications Director at 860/240-8449; or 860/836-2145

Despite some key losses, 2015 Session a Positive one for Women

A PCSW Legislative Round-Up

For Immediate Release: Thursday, June 4, 2015

HARTFORD – From the perspective of women’s rights, the legislative session that just ended was a mixture of several wins and a few disappointing setbacks. Many of the bills concerning women passed with historic bipartisan support. And while PCSW’s major initiative – Paid Family and Medical Leave – did not make it over the finish line, it defied expectations by receiving the support of two legislative committees. The Commission will build on the momentum gained this session – and nationally – by working with elected officials on both sides of the aisle to see Paid Family and Medical Leave become a reality in Connecticut.

Wins for Women

Seven bills that have already become law, or are on their way to becoming public policy, will enhance women’s lives in terms of economic security, health and safety, and the elimination of gender discrimination.

“There were significant ‘wins’ in all three of our priority areas,” said PCSW Executive Director Carolyn Treiss. “The breadth of women’s rights that were protected and advanced is a testament to our state’s longstanding support of women and families.”

Legislative initiatives that passed include:

H.B. 6850: An Act Concerning Pay Equity and Fairness.

Introduced by Gov. Malloy, this bill passed with bipartisan support in both chambers (House 104-40) and Senate (29-7). This bill is a solid first step in addressing the lack of transparency in the workplace concerning wages. It means employers can no longer prevent employees from voluntarily discussing their own wages, or retaliating against anyone who does. This is critical, because one cannot fight gender-based pay discrimination if salaries cannot be compared.

H.B. 6498: An Act Concerning the Timely Transfer and Processing of Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kits.

The bill is aimed at expediting the handling of critical evidence in sexual assault cases and will set up strict timelines during which police must retrieve rape evidence kits from hospitals and bring them to the state's forensic lab for testing. This will ensure that key DNA samples will be available to prosecutors in rape cases.

S.B. 446: An Act Concerning the Definition of the Term “Domestic Worker.”

For too long, people who work as caregivers in private homes have been unable to invoke labor protections under CHRO. Because of this new law, nearly 40,000 such workers have now gained the right to file a complaint with CHRO if they believe they've been discriminated against or exploited. The bill passed by a large margin in the Senate (33-3) and in the House (130-14).

H.B. 6849: An Act Strengthening Protections for Victims of Human Trafficking.

A Governor's bill, this initiative says that a minor engaged in the sex trade is presumed to be a victim of trafficking rather than a prostitute. This protection now means that rather than enter into the criminal justice system, an underage sex worker will be connected with appropriate services for victims of sexual violence.

S.B. 904: An Act Establishing the Connecticut Women Veterans' Program.

Longstanding programs for veterans were developed without the unique needs of women veterans in mind, and this bill acknowledges the need for information and services tailored for female vets. Both chambers voted unanimously to pass this bill.

S.B.428: An Act Protecting Interns from Workplace Sexual Harassment and Discrimination.

This bill received unanimous bipartisan support in both the Senate and the House. Unpaid interns, by virtue of their very status, as well as the power differential between an intern and a supervisor, are in particularly vulnerable positions with regard to sexual harassment. Previously, unpaid interns did not fall within the definition of “employee,” and so had no recourse in cases of sexual harassment. This bill will give these workers a voice.

H.B. 6921: An Act Concerning Invasions of Privacy.

This bill strengthens the state's laws against voyeurism and outlaws the sharing of intimate images without the subject's consent. This bill passed both chambers unanimously.

*(As of press time, the status of **H.B. 5848: An Act Concerning Women Returning to the Workforce**, which would create a program in the Dept. of Labor to provide training for women who have been out of the workplace following a leave of absence, was evolving.)*

Setbacks

While the PCSW applauds these many significant wins, the General Assembly failed to pass two key bills that address violence against women. The failure of these bills is especially troubling because neither had fiscal implications, and both would have dramatically enhanced women's safety, either on college campuses or in the home.

S.B. 636: An Act Concerning Affirmative Consent.

This bill would have built upon last year's groundbreaking campus sexual assault legislation, which received unanimous support. It would have required institutions of higher education to include in their sexual assault, stalking and intimate partner violence policies affirmative consent, which means “active, clear and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity.” It made it through the Senate with only one “no” vote, making its failure in the House particularly regrettable.

“This session, it became clear to us that we have a lot of work to do in changing cultural attitudes about violence against women,” said PCSW Senior Policy Analyst Jillian Gilchrest. “The failure of Affirmative Consent was a real blow because, as a state, we had the chance to send nationally an unambiguous message that sexual intimacy should be a shared experience. And it would have challenged a system that perpetuates the notion that any one person is entitled to another person’s body without his or her consent.”

S.B. 650: An Act Concerning Temporary Restraining Orders and H.B. 6848: An Act Protecting Victims of Domestic Violence.

Although a priority of the Governor and Democratic Leaders of both chambers, neither bill came to a vote in either chamber (S.B. 650 was called in the Senate but was not voted on.) Each year in Connecticut, an average of 14 intimate partner homicides occur. (Of the 188 intimate partner homicides that occurred 2000-2012, nearly 90% were committed against women.) A woman is most at risk of being injured or killed when she first tries to leave an abusive relationship, which makes her particularly vulnerable in the time between the granting of the temporary restraining order and the court hearing which may determine that a more permanent protection is needed. These potentially lifesaving bills would have given the courts authority to order the removal of firearms from the home during this volatile interim period.

And according to Treiss, “the failure of the Temporary Restraining Order bills is regrettable, because PCSW believes that any bill that has the potential to save even one woman’s life should carry more weight than concerns over an inconvenience to some gun owners.”

About the PCSW: The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women was formed in 1973 under Sec. 46a-1 of the Connecticut General Statutes to study and improve Connecticut women’s economic security, health and safety; to promote consideration of qualified women to leadership positions and to work toward the elimination of gender discrimination. As a non-partisan arm of the General Assembly, the agency monitors, critiques and recommends changes to legislation in order to inform public policy, and assesses programs and practices in all State agencies for their effect on the state’s women. The PCSW serves as a liaison between government and its diverse constituents, and convenes stakeholders, including the business, non-profit and educational communities, local governments, and the media, in order to promote awareness of women’s issues.