

City of Worcester Advisory Committee on the Status of Women

VIRTUAL MEETING MINUTES– Tuesday, December 7, 2021, 5:45 pm

Video available online: <https://play.champds.com/worcesterma/event/1080>

Spanish interpretation online video: <https://play.champds.com/worcesterma/event/1081>

Members Present: Kayanna James, Violet Kabaso, Marcia Macri, Samantha Sendrowski, Martha Benitez, Rubby Wuabu, and Tracey Whitney

Members Absent: Heather Borelli

Staff: Jayna Turchek

Guest presenters (in order of appearance): Kim Dawkins, President and CEO, Pathways for Change; Deborah Hall, Executive Director YWCA of Central Massachusetts; Karen Riley-McNary, VP of Outreach & Advocacy for Living in Freedom Together (LIFT); Sgt. Justin Bennes, Detective Unit (Sexual Crimes and Investigations), Worcester Police Department; Attorney Edward Karcasinas, Worcester District Attorney's Office; and Attorney Beth Keeley, Human Trafficking Division Chief, MA Attorney General's Office.

1. Call to order and Introductions

Chairperson James called the meeting to order at 5:50 pm. The Chairperson welcomed members of the committee and those present, and a roll call was taken that established a quorum.

Chairperson James announced that the new agenda has been distributed and asked if anything needs to be revised. The agenda was accepted as distributed. New committee member Marcia Macri was introduced and welcomed. Chairperson James announced that the meeting will also be available in Spanish.

2. Approval of November 9, 2021, meeting minutes

Martha Benitez motioned to accept the minutes as written for the November 9, 2021 meeting. Samantha Sendrowski seconded. Minutes unanimously passed on a roll call vote 7-0-0.

3. Topic: Gender-based violence Part 2: Shifting cultural & societal attitudes & addressing gender inequities

A. Introduction of Topic

Rubby Wuabu thanked those in attendance and provided summary of previous meeting. The Committee is hosting these meetings to educate our community and figure out ways to contribute to the change. Two highlights from the last meeting: home is not always a safe space, and cultural shift must be made. This meeting is to bring forth action to help address/prevent gender-based violence. Rubby Wuabu introduced panelists.

B. Questions

What needs to be done to shift the cultural and societal attitudes that perpetuate gender-based crime?

Kim Dawkins: A comprehensive approach must be taken, and there ought to be concentration on representation. A balance must be found to be able to work together and make effective change within our communities.

Deborah Hall: Education and spreading the word about gender-based violence to get people informed and find different ways to address the issue.

Karen Riley-McNary: Change the language on how we speak about gender-based violence and target perpetrators. Power equals voice. Let's give voice to the powerful.

How do we expand conversation/services beyond the typical audience? Who should be here, who should we be bringing into conversation?

Karen Riley-McNary: We are already here. We are part of it. We need to hear from survivors and families to understand what they need from their communities.

Kim Dawkins: Survivors, specifically those in city-council, leadership, law enforcement, medical institutions, etc. There cannot be a shift in attitude without education. The City must invest time, money, and resources in order to have proper funding to perpetrate any form of change.

Demonstrates to our communities that it matters to have change for these issues. It cannot just be about conversations. These conversations need to amount to something more significant.

In what spaces should these pieces of education occur?

Deborah Hall: These discussions begin at home before even getting to school, starting those conversations and breaking the traditional separation of genders.

Karen Riley-McNary: We go from home to the community. We need people in power, specifically those from the City of Worcester, to implement what we educate back into our communities in a strategic form.

Do members of the panel believe that the sexual education curriculum is a step in the right direction?

- A great step towards gender parity and equity.
- Fantastic effort but unsure if it will affect this specific issue

Resources for parents/guardians and communities can use to teach children:

- Variety of programs from each organizations
- Enough Abuse Campaign Ending Child Abuse
- Sexual Assault Youth Education Program
- Working with IDD Youth, LGBT+ Youth, Homeless Youth

The issue with these programs is that Worcester is not funding these programs. For example, the Sexual Assault Youth Education Program has funding in North and South County, where the program has succeeded.

How do you view your agencies role in this work?

- Educate
- Resources available
- Voice in the community
- Answer questions
- Active on social media
- Listen to survivors
- Holding individuals accountable

What would you like to see or need that you do not see happening right now or cannot happen now based on the system and constraints and/or legal frameworks?

Sgt. Justin Bennes: I have been a police officer for almost twenty years. We all have similar frustrations in the work we do. When it comes down to it, we can arrest an offender, but there is a lot more that needs to work and be done. Whether offenders are detained and serve time or released, they eventually re-enter and go back into the community. There is only so much we can do.

Attorney Edward Karcasinas: Patriarchy won't go out without a fight and as a middle-aged man, I can be seen as a perpetrator and many times survivors will believe I will not be able to help and that is something that has to be worked on is explaining to them that we are not a threat and that

we are here to help you. Without cooperation, it is difficult to prosecute, and we need help communicating with survivors, diversity is a must. Building trust with oppressed communities. Survivors should be allowed to speak on incidents that occurred even if it was not reported to the police.

Attorney Beth Keeley, Human Trafficking Division Chief, MA Attorney General's Office: Shows gratitude for Attorney Edward Karcasinas for being there and helping survivors. Listening is a very important aspect in which I have to change perspectives to fully understand and find a way to better assist individuals.

Do you think that the status and power of police and law enforcement as a whole serve as a barrier for victims' reporting? Why does Worcester have low sexual assault reports?

Sgt. Justin Bennes: There is always hesitancy when reporting any crime, especially such intimate and traumatic crimes, which is definitely a barrier. We are in the process of improving the Criminal Justice Response Program. We are starting off with a program called Outstanding Warrant Service to detain perpetrators primarily with Gender-Based violence. Watch Dog is another program that works with Probation where officers will do check-ins to see if those who are on probation are violating probation and will arrest if need be. Police Initiative Response to Sexually Exploited Women is a program to help survivors with any needs they can provide.

Deborah Hall: For some survivors they do not want to be near police officers and fear them. This is something we need to work on and try to demonstrate to survivors that officers are here to help.

Karen Riley-McNary: A large issue I have been seeing is that because of those warrants Sergeant Bennes was talking about survivors are being arrested as well in the process. There are not enough pathways for reporting, and the change will most likely not happen with the prosecution. We need to shift power and have those conversations with people we typically would not have.

What is an action step your organization wants to take? And what action step can individuals, communities and the city take?

Attorney Edward Karcasinas: I want to incorporate more individuals from the community and different perspectives to be a part of the District Attorney's office to assist survivors better. Also we want to create office hours at other organizations such as LIFT and other locations to allow survivors to choose where they would prefer to meet.

Attorney Beth Keeley: Bringing back all this information to the State and look for training to better assist survivors. On a personal level I plan on having these conversations at home and with family.

Deborah Hall: Continuing the conversations, and recognize that we can transform society and truly make change. I commit to always showing to do this work everyday, all day no matter where I am. I think the committee should bring these suggestions to the City Manager to make progress in our City.

Stg. Justin Bennes: I cannot make a huge change especially because I have only been in this position for six months but I plan to take this very seriously, I will commit to meet with organizations like the ones on this panel to possibly work together to make something happen within our communities.

Karen Riley-McNary: I will be that person to reach out to the people who do not feel heard and will openly listen and help them to the best of my abilities.

Kim Dawkins: Do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. Give the options to the City Manager to put forth actions within the city.

Rubby Wuabu communicates that these meetings were to gather information to take further up and see what is possible to do in order to fight against gender-based violence in Worcester.

What are some obstacles to the safety of Women and Girls, what areas (physical/non-physical) are unsafe/safe, and why? What types of violence and sexual harassments do Women and Girls face in public spaces?

Kim Dawkins: Practical, small steps we or the more specifically the City can take are; better lighting in parking lots/garages, improved accessibility, safe spaces, etc. We need more spaces available for survivors to be able to speak on what they need to talk about.

Why is it that if a women backs out from a domestic violence case that we cannot prosecute the man but we can obligate him to take anger management classes that he has to pay for?

We need cooperation in order to prosecute in most cases, we attempt to prosecute with just the evidence but many times that is not enough. Batterers Intervention Program is more specific for Domestic Violence cases.

Additional Comments:

- Let us not forget that we need a big change not just the small actions but continue to work on something to dismantle patriarchy, inequities and gender-based violence.
- The biggest issue is gender-based violence.
- The committee welcomes any recommendations and partnerships.
- Rather than teaching women to be cautious, there has to be a shift in education.
- Glad that the District Attorney's office is attempting to get more diversity in the office to help survivors on different levels

- Thank you to survivors who participated tonight, for opening up this forum and bringing light to these issues.

C. Conclusion of the Meeting

Rubby Wuabu thanked the panelists and attendees and stated that the information gathered during these sessions will be submitted to advise the City administration.

4. Adjournment (Next meeting is Tuesday, January 4, 2022)

Motion to dismiss the meeting by Rubby Wuabu. Seconded by Samantha Sendrowski. Motion unanimously passed on a roll call vote 7-0-0.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:55 pm.