

**THE COOK COUNTY COMMISSION ON
WOMEN'S ISSUES**



**Women and Girls - SEX and SEXUALITY:
HEALTH and HARMS**

**Public Hearing Report
By the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues
From the October 21, 2010 Public Hearing**

**Peggy A. Montes, Chairperson
MaryNic U. Foster, Executive Director (2008-2013)**

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Table of Contents | 5 |
| Acknowledgements..... | 6 |
| A Letter from the Chair..... | 7 |
| Brief Historical Account of the Cook County Commission on Women’s Issues | 8 |
| Introduction to the Topic | 10 |
| Women and Girls: Sex and Sexuality – Health and Harms | 11 |
| Issue 1: Violence against women and girls includes numerous types of violence and is widespread. ... | 11 |
| Issue 2: Incarceration of women and girls | 14 |
| Issue 3: Physical health/Well-being..... | 15 |
| Conclusion | 18 |
| Appendices..... | 19 |

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A Letter from the Chair

Dear President Preckwinkle, Members of the Board of Commissioners and Friends,

On behalf of the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues, I am pleased to present to you the Commission's *2010 Public Hearing Report: Women and Girls - Sex and Sexuality: Health and Harms*. For over sixteen years, the historic Cook County Commission on Women's Issues has been at the forefront of being compassionate and passionate advocates for girls and women of Cook County. I have been honored and humbled to be the Chair of this Commission, and to work hand in hand with such a dedicated group of women. The County's Women's Commission has sponsored hearings focusing on various issues affecting women and girls in Cook County and presented recommendations to the President and County Board Commissioners to implement in terms of public policy and programming in Cook County government. The Commission continues to work both on its own, and collaboratively with other governmental and non-governmental agencies, to highlight and support the advancement of women and girls in Cook County. There has been no issue too sensitive or too difficult for this Commission to tackle. The Commission has brought to light such topics as Girls and Aggression, Human Trafficking, and, of course, the subject of this year's Public Hearing – "Women and Girls – Sex and Sexuality: Health and Harms."

The Cook County Commission is responsible for being the voice for those women and girls who cannot speak for themselves and bringing their concerns directly to the attention of the President and Cook County Board Commissioners. Although the Commission has had success, there is the realization that this is a never-ending fight for justice and parity. We, the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues, will continue on task, providing information and education, urging our elected leaders to take action and fighting for justice and parity for the women and girls of Cook County; and like women everywhere, we will stay the course until victory is ours!

Peggy A. Montes

Chairperson, Cook County Commission on Women's Issues (1995 – Present)

Brief Historical Account of the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues

Background

In August 1993, Cook County Board Commissioner John H. Stroger met with Peggy A. Montes and requested that she develop a Women's Committee. At that time, Ms. Montes was a respected and recognized advocate in the community who fought for the cause of equality and parity for women. Ms. Montes was also known for coordinating the Women's Network that assisted in electing Harold Washington as the first African American Mayor of Chicago. Under Mayor Washington, Ms. Montes was the first Chairperson of the newly established City of Chicago's Commission on Women's Issues. Ms. Montes agreed to develop and coordinate a Women's Committee for Commissioner Stroger, with one caveat that upon election to Cook County Board President, Commissioner Stroger, recognizing the unique needs and challenges affecting women in Cook County, would establish a Cook County Women's Commission – a first for Cook County Government. Commissioner Stroger responded positively to Ms. Montes' suggestion; and on October 5, 1993, he sponsored a Cook County Board resolution to establish the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues.

Formation of the Cook County Women's Commission

On March 4, 1994, a resolution was passed unanimously by the Cook County Board of Commissioners that created the first Cook County Commission on Women's Issues. The first Women's Commissioners were appointed in 1995. There were seventeen Commissioners; one representing each county district. Ms. Peggy Montes was appointed Chairperson and Fourth District Commissioner. In 2007, Cook County Board President, Todd H. Stroger, sponsored a resolution to reorganize the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues. The resolution was passed by the Cook County Commissioners; and, on April 9, 2008, the "new" Cook County Women's Commission was established. Under the new resolution, the Women's Commission now consists of twenty-one members; one from each Cook County Board District, and four at-large members appointed by the President of the Cook County Board, with one of these at-large appointees also serving as the Commission's Chairperson.

Annual Public Hearing History

One of the powers and duties that the Resolution imbued to the Commission on Women's Issues was the authority to convene a public hearing in order to gather information on issues affecting women and girls. Each October, the Commission on Women's Issues sponsors a public hearing on a topic of particular interest or relevance to women and girls. The Women's Commissioners select a topic and invite professionals, advocates and other experts to present testimony and to identify recommendations for action to be taken by the Women's Commission, members of the Cook County Board of Commissioners and other interested stakeholders.

Since 2005, the Commission has brought to light and made recommendations for action on the following topics:

- 2005: Girls and Aggression
- 2007: Human trafficking– The sex trade in Cook County
- 2008: Economic empowerment of women: Challenges and obstacles
- 2009: Housing- A basic human right: A woman’s ability to attack and retain housing in Cook County

This year, for the first time since the Commission began holding public hearings, the Commission, with assistance of Women’s Commissioner’s from a number of Cook County Districts, in partnership with experts culled from the public hearing presenters, held a number of educational forums which spun out of the 2010 Public Hearing Topic.

Below are the educational forums and workshops that have been held throughout Cook County since 2010:

- “Hurting in Silence – A Discussion on Teen Bullying and Suicide”
- “Girls on the Wall – A Film Screening and Discussion Focusing on Incarcerated Teen-aged Girls”
- “Young Women’s Healthy Choices Forum – A Discussion on Healthy Choices for Young Women and Men”
- “Human Trafficking - a Community Forum”

Introduction to the Topic

The 2010 Public Hearing was held on October 21, 2010, from 9:00 A.M. to 12:30 P.M. at the George W. Dunne Cook County Office Building, 69 West Washington, Chicago Illinois. The topic-- Women and Girls-Sex and Sexuality: Health and Harms.

The members of the Commission on Women's Issues, in choosing this year's public hearing topic, decided that a critical look was needed on how violence, low self-esteem, inadequate health care and educational gaps negatively impact women and girls' thoughts and perceptions about sex and sexuality. The Commission also wanted to examine how to best address and reverse these harms by looking at programs which promote and encourage the positive physical, mental, emotional and sexual well-being of women and girls

The hearing was a cross cultural exchange of information about women and girls' sex and sexuality, and was attended by more than fifty individuals.

There was a wide genre of participants who, like the attendees, were also multicultural, socio-economic and gender diverse. Twenty individuals, professionals, advocates and other experts, representing various agencies were selected to address the topic. From the initial response received by the Commission, it was clear people were more than willing to speak on this issue.

Their presentations addressed several types of violence, along with incarceration, pregnancy, juvenile incarceration, prostitution, cancer, HIV and AIDS, and HPV. It was noted by the speakers that this was the first time that this subject, *Women and Girls: Sex and Sexuality - Health and Harms*, had been addressed this comprehensively in Illinois.

The Cook County Commission of Women's Issues selected the aforementioned topic as a way to educate themselves, as well as members of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, other interested stakeholders, and of course, the public on the status of women's and girls' health. What are those healthy and unhealthy physical, mental and emotional conditions and behaviors that affect girls and women, as well as the community's health? This report is provided so that the reader can obtain an overall spectrum of issues pertaining to the health of women and girls along with recommendations designed to promote and improve the health and wellness of girls, women and their communities.

One of the overriding messages of this public hearing was that most, if not all, of the unhealthy patterns within Cook County are consistent with generational cycles of poverty, under and unemployment, single parenting or repeat pregnancies, poor educational achievement and violence and crimes especially among teens. The information from the public hearing further emphasized that African American mothers under twenty who reside in Cook County, and specifically within the City of Chicago, are the most at-risk and vulnerable. These groups demonstrate the greatest health disparities compared to state and national statistics. This report is a summary of the issues and recommendations from these "experts," many of whom are Cook County constituents.

Women and Girls: Sex and Sexuality – Health and Harms

Issue 1: Violence against women and girls includes numerous types of violence and is widespread.

Violence against women and girls is clearly an identifiable harm, and it is also a significant public health concern. It is prevalent and has a negative impact on communities. Several presenters introduced and discussed the issue at length, identifying it as an impediment to the physical and mental well-being of women and girls. There are many different types of violence women encounter, below are some that were discussed.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of physical and psychological abuse, threats, intimidation, isolation or economic coercion. The Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence reported that in one 24-hour period, 2,830 victims of domestic violence received life-saving services from local domestic violence service providers. The prevalence of instances of domestic violence against women remains an obstacle to the health of women and our communities.

Below are some staggering statistics on abuse:

- A woman is beaten in the United States once in every 15 seconds
- One in four women who attempt suicide are victims of abuse
- One in four women who have psychiatric symptoms and reach out for services are victims of abuse
- 42 percent of murdered women are killed by their intimate male partner
- 6 percent of all pregnant women are abused
- Pregnancy complications are significantly higher—from low birth weight, higher anemia, infections, maternal depression, suicide attempts and substance abuse in women who have been abused

Battered Immigrant Women

Immigrant women have additional and complex concerns when domestic violence occurs in their household, whether they are the target of the violence or live with someone who is.

Below are a number of concerns identified by presenters at the public hearing that are somewhat unique to immigrant woman:

- Fear of abandonment and/or deportation
- Loss and displacement – refugee, asylum, trafficking and voluntary immigration
- Challenges of acculturation
- Language Barrier

- Isolation
- Lack of information (rules, rights, laws, etc.)
- Difficulty in obtaining education and employment, leading to further dependence

Sexual Violence

Sexual assault victims are consistently not having their basic medical needs fully met as provided under the state law, which bolsters the thought that this is also a public health issue.

Below are some disturbing trends and observations about cultural acceptance of sexual violence:

- One in three girls will be sexually assaulted or abused before she turns eighteen
- It is important to not glamorize those who sexually exploit, such as “pimps.” This harms the victims such as prostitutes and children.
- The media plays a part in our tacit acceptance of inappropriate sexuality. If young girls do not meet the societally-accepted physically or behaviorally, the message that they receive is that they are worthless. Their self-esteem is negatively affected, which results in changes in behavior. They seek acceptance outside of themselves.
- Sexual violence is different in the level of commitment, attention and expertise needed to address it
- Sexual violence involves clients, children, family members, the abuser

Violence in Schools

In 2009, 18.9 percent of Chicago high school girls reported that they had been hit, slapped or hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend. The rates are higher among African American girls, a staggering 22.6 percent, while 8.7 percent reported that they had been forced into sexual intercourse. There is an increase in girls experiencing violence and harassment.

Recommendations:

- Create a Cook County-wide initiative that acknowledges that violence against girls and women is a public health issue and that it affects not just the women and girls involved but also families and communities
- Create a certification for all Cook County Hospitals to mandate certain standards of care
- Create mobile units to provide 24-hour responses to hospitals throughout the county
- Create strategy for health care professionals working with CCDPH and CCBHS to address how to respond to and service girls, including survivors of sexual violence
- Support efforts to increase public awareness and prevention education
- Advocate for funding
- Provide healthy relationship-building and nonviolent conflict resolution skill-building opportunities for families
- Perpetrator accountability
- Mandatory domestic violence education and training for first responders
- Personal responsibility to change societal perception of domestic violence
- Undertake an aggressive effort to create a public education campaign that raises awareness of the causes and effects of sexual violence against women and girls

- Change the perception and the act of how girls are talked to - Girls should not be viewed as victims
- Create a safe space for girls so that they can access counseling without fear of exposure to peers

Issue 2: Incarceration of women and girls.

Incarcerated Women

Women who have encountered high incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation are often times coerced into the sex trade. Many of the women involved in sex trade have experienced extensive physical and sexual abuse. Often times, the violent cycle continues with their johns and pimps. Unfortunately, these women, who are not flight risks or dangers to society, regularly end up in Cook County Jail for long periods of time because of their inability to post bail. Nearly 80 percent of women at the Cook County jail are nonviolent offenders. They've been arrested for drugs, prostitution or theft-related crimes, and repeatedly cycle through jail leaving their children and destabilizing their homes. The vast majority of women who are arrested are living with their children at the time of arrest. There is a seemingly greater risk in removing these women from their homes and communities than the risk of flight. Judges need to take that into account when these women show up for bond court.

The criminal focus needs to be shifted from the women to the johns and pimps. These women are victims, not criminals. In 2008, Cook County adopted an ordinance to increase the fines for those patronizing persons in prostitution in unincorporated Cook County. The revenue generated from this ticketing will be directed to the Women's Justice Services Fund to support the Department of Women's Justice Services under the Sheriff's Office.

Recommendations:

- Work to decriminalize trafficked and prostituted individuals
- Look at prostitutes as victims of abuse
- Programs specifically for survivors of prostitution
- Consider writing a letter commending Judge Biebel for his leadership on what will be the first specialty court in the Midwest dealing with felony prostitution offense

Incarcerated Juveniles

In 2007 it was reported that \$78,000 was spent annually to incarcerate one young person in Illinois. Additionally 50,000 youth aged 10 to 16 are arrested every year. Of those 50,000 10,000 are girls. 70 percent of those 10,000 are arrested for nonviolent crimes. Incarcerated girls are more likely to suffer from substance abuse, emotional trauma, anxiety disorders and depression. They have also likely encountered abuse and neglect. Suicide behaviors for these girls are 2.5 times greater than the general population. Similarly, these girls also have high incidence rates of STDs, unplanned pregnancies and dental problems.

Recommendations:

- Employment opportunities and training
- Access back to school
- Rent assistance and an emergency fund
- Housing/reentry site shelters where they can live
- Reducing costs of expungement petitions for juveniles

Issue 3: Physical health/Well-being.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

Raising awareness about HIV/AIDS could potentially reduce the number of women who walk around without knowing that they are infected by 75 percent in Chicago and 73 percent in collar communities. In Illinois, 78 percent of those who have HIV reside in Chicago while 13 percent live in Cook County. In the State of Illinois, 91 percent of the HIV/AIDS population lives in Cook County.

By far the largest percentage of women affected by HIV are African-American and Latina women. The largest numbers of women who are diagnosed as HIV positive are African-American, followed by Latinas who represent 12 percent of women diagnosed as HIV positive. Together, in 2009, these groups accounted for 85 percent of women who were diagnosed as HIV positive. In 2009, 61 percent of HIV transmissions was by heterosexual transmissions, while 10 percent was through drug use.

Barriers to the care of HIV-positive women are due to the following:

- Stigma
- Competing priorities
- Poverty
- Intimate partner violence
- Substance abuse
- Mental health issues
- Undocumented immigrants
- Language barriers
- Low health literacy
- Minimal support from significant others

For women who are diagnosed, it is important to point out the following:

- Regular doctor's visits
- Up-to-date preventive health screenings (mammograms, pap smears, immunizations, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar monitoring, etc.)
- Mental health evaluations and services
- Chemical dependence assessments
- Dental health check-ups
- Psycho social support
- Early testing and linkage to care
- Medication adherence
- Disclosing as needed (especially during pregnancy)

Papillomavirus and HPV

HPV is an STD virus where there has been a direct link to various types of cancers such as cervical, head, anal and neck cancer. It also plays a role in cervical dysplasia as well as a number of other diseases. By

the time a woman turns 50, there is an 80 percent chance that she has or has had at least one genital HPV infection. In the United States, minority women face twice the rate of cervical cancer mortality of middle class Caucasian women.

There are only two options in treating HPV, prevention and surgery. Prevention is vital and there are two vaccines that have been developed to immunize for HPV, Cervarix and Gardasil. Immunizing everyone, regardless of sexual activity, and having a dialogue about the effects of HPV in communities are of vast importance in battling HPV. The vaccines are highly recommended for male and female adolescents. It is recommended to be given to girls when they are 11-12 years old.

Recommendations:

- Gynecological care
- Affordable access to birth control
- Counseling
- Safe spaces for adolescents who are using birth control without parental knowledge

Poor Physical Health

It is important to address additional physical health issues and raise awareness in women, in order to create healthier relationships between women and their bodies, so they do not need to think of them as separate entities. Health promotion is vital to cancer and gynecological prevention.

Endometrial cancer is a prime example of a cancer that has been linked to an unhealthy lifestyle. According to Dr. Singh, between 60 and 80 percent of endometrial cancer is related to being overweight. Being overweight has also been linked to anovulation and the production of high estrogen levels post menopause.

Recommendations:

- Healthy nutrition
- Physical activity
- Not smoking
- Maintaining a healthy body mass index
- Fighting obesity

Single Parenting and Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy creates generational cycles of poverty, under and unemployment, single parenting or repeat pregnancy, poor educational achievement, poor health and development, violence and crime. An analysis revealed that the U.S. was number one among industrialized countries in terms of teen births and pregnancy rates. Nationally we spend \$9 billion in teen childbearing, while in Illinois we are spending \$403 million.

Recommendations:

- There needs to be better training for caregivers [page 33 of transcript]
- A nurse (versus a paraprofessional) is needed
- Greater intensity of service

- Nurse Family Partnership in high-risk communities (low-risk communities demonstrate the largest positive effects). These partnership benefits exceed the costs

Conclusion

This Public Hearing was a gathering of dynamic and knowledgeable individuals representing various areas of women's and girls' health and sexuality. Excellent ideas were put forth. Cook County constituents and experts in their various fields offered a variety of recommendations. While there were several subjects and themes including, violence against women and girls, physical health care such as obesity, HIV, HPV and the effects on women, children and the community was a direct and recurring theme.

Violence against women and access to health care can be an immediate focus through highlighting public education and ensuring that services are affordable to all. Investigating the probability of women who are nonviolent, not going to jail thereby disrupting their children, relationships and community was also brought to the floor. The speakers focused on nonviolent women who reside with their children and families during the time of their arrest. The arrest often destroys the family and disrupts the community.

Issues of poverty, along with a long list of other concerns, continue to be paramount because these conditions are directly and indirectly correlated to many of the themes and subjects discussed. Recommendations such as financial assistance might be given for a house to assist women who are reentering society after incarceration. In some places the HPV vaccine is given in schools, something that could be implemented in Cook County. Encourage and assist programs such as the Nurse Family Partnership, a home-based nurse visitation program, which is a part of the Mercy Young Women's Health Initiative.

Our hope is that this report proves useful and informative for President Preckwinkle, her administration and to all Cook County constituents.

Appendices

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