

# The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

## Framingham: Commission on women identifies challenges



Testifying before the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women, Cassandra Tremblay holds her child, McKenna, 6 months, as she describes the support she has received at Serenity House in Hopkinton. Tremblay offered her comments during the commission's inaugural hearing on issues facing MetroWest women and girls, held at MassBay Community College on Wednesday evening. Daily News Photo/Kathleen Culler

**By Brittney McNamara/Daily News Staff**

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FRAMINGHAM – Looking out at a room of about 40 women, Paula Mayfield gripped the podium as she detailed her past life as an addict, a middle school dropout, a young mother, an inmate. She then detailed her life now, as a store manager and the house manager at Shadow Shelter for Women, where she helps women with struggles like she once had.

Mayfield spoke to the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women on Wednesday at its inaugural hearing to identify the challenges facing women and girls. Speaker after speaker asked the nine women commissioners to lobby legislators and support programs to help women find the resources to succeed.

The commission, created in January, advocates on behalf of local women to support and advance their opportunities and rights. At the hearing Wednesday, the commission asked for help in identifying the most pressing problems holding women back.

Representatives from the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, Hopkinton's Serenity House, the Massachusetts Women's Justice Network, Voices Against Violence and more teamed up with locals to bring safe and affordable housing challenges, obstacles to get child care vouchers, lack of accessible and affordable transportation and other barriers to success to the forefront.

Tania DiDuca, program director at SMOC's rental assistance operation, said the biggest challenges women who filter through her program face are getting child care vouchers and transportation.

“The ability to move ahead is impossible if (women) cannot secure affordable child care,” DiDuca said.

Many times, DiDuca said, women must go on welfare to get child care vouchers. WSRO general manager Ilma Paixao urged the council to lobby for support programs that allow women to keep their jobs, homes and children so they can hold on to their opportunities while still getting help.

DiDuca said if a woman does manage to get that help, transportation is then often a barrier.

“Public transportation is often unreliable, doesn’t run late enough, and isn’t far reaching enough,” she said.

Vanh Phommasinh, from the Shadow Shelter in Ashland, asked commissioners to investigate access to safe and affordable housing for women. The number of women sleeping on the streets, she said, is increasing. Wanda Oyola, of SMOC, backed Phommasinh up, saying the number of women seeking affordable units in the MetroWest has increased.

Casandra Tremblay was one of those women before she went to the Serenity House in Hopkinton.

“I was completely broken, homeless, devastated, scared,” Tremblay said, holding her six-month-old daughter. “The house has provided me with the tools (I need).”

The commission will use the subjects brought up at the hearing to guide its work. The commission’s next meeting is Oct. 21 at a yet to be decided location.

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Mary Gianakis, director of Voices Against Violence, testifies before the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women. Daily News Photo/Kathleen Culler



Commissioners Kelly Love, left and Patricia Hohl, listen to testimony given by Mary Gianakis, right, director of Voices Against Violence, during the inaugural hearing on the Issues Facing Metrowest Girls and Women, convened by the MetroWest Commission on the Status of Women at MassBay Community College on Wednesday evening. Daily News and Wicked Local Photo/Kathleen Culler.