

HISTORY OF THE BERGEN COUNTY COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

In September 1975, the Bergen County Board of Chosen Freeholders observed International Women's Year by creating the Advisory Commission on the Status of Women, to:

- study the needs, capabilities and concerns of women in Bergen County, and
- recommend and review programs and plans affecting the status of women, in order to promote the expansion of their rights and available opportunities.

The 14 appointed Commissioners held outreach meetings throughout the county, which were attended by scores of individuals and representatives of organizations, who gave the Commission the benefit of their thoughts and concerns. Follow-up outreach campaigns were conducted in 1989 and 1993. This kind of outreach, supplemented by Commissioners' links with groups and organizations in the county, has determined the Commission's priorities for research, study, publication of reports, recommendation and advocacy.

The Commission's high priority issues include health care, crimes of violence against women, affordable housing, employment rights and opportunities, child care, sexual harassment, child support collection, care of elderly parents, women in government, education, legislation affecting women and political action.

The Commission has co-founded and has participated in several networking organizations such as the Bergen County Alliance for Women, the Family Support Coalition of Bergen County, the School-Aged Child Care Coalition, and the Bergen County Women's Roundtable. Though these organizations, the Commission has kept in touch with the concerns of women and has co-sponsored programs on topics such as child care, teenage pregnancy and affordable housing.

The Commission's annual Women's History Month programs highlight the contributions of individual groups of women, and its annual celebration of Women's Equality Day and the anniversary of the suffrage amendment serve to promote public awareness of women's abilities and hard-won rights.

In recent years, the Commission has established a support group to increase public appreciation of the value of diversity in our lives and in the lives of children, and to address the challenge of communication presented by diversity. Another recent activity is a series of educational programs about Social Security geared especially for women planning retirement.

CRIMES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The Commission's very first report, Crimes of Violence Against Women – Rape and Battered Women, published in 1977 was distributed throughout Bergen County and beyond. This pioneering source of material was requested by federal, state and county agencies and by universities, libraries, police training academies, civic service organizations, special interest groups and individuals all over the United States. The report's findings were used to document needs and to secure funding for three programs in Bergen County: Alternatives to Domestic Violence, the Rape Crisis Center and Shelter Our Sisters, all of which provide essential services to women endangered by crimes of violence.

In July of 1991, a tragic death caused by domestic violence shocked the community. An overwhelming response by women resulted in letters to the press, meetings and a protest march. To channel the fear and anger, and as a follow-up to its 1977 report, the Commission organized a Community Court Watch project. The project monitors the handling of domestic violence cases in court, noting whether the Prevention of Domestic Act is being enforced, and how litigants are being treated. The impact of the Court Watch project is evident in the result of this continuation effort – Court Watch II.

Originally seen as a one-year phenomenon, the Bergen County Commission on the Status of Women has survived for 20 years and is still going strong. The Commission will continue to keep in touch with the concerns, issues, needs, wishes and dreams of Bergen County women, and will continue to be a catalyst for action and a voice for women in our county.

The Commission has published several in-depth studies and a number of brochures including:

STUDIES:

Community Court Watch Project, 1995

Community Court Watch Project, 1993

Employment Search in Bergen County, 1982

Bergen County Directory of Organization for Women, 1980

Child Care, 1979

Women in Government, 1977

Crimes of Violence Against Women – Rape and Battered Women, 1977

BROCHURES:

Looking for Job

Women in Government

The ABCs of Selecting a Child Care Center

PUBLICATIONS:

Camps and Summer Programs for Children, 1990

(Bergen County Alliance for Women)

Help When You Need It, 1988

(Health and Welfare Council of Bergen County)