

WOMEN'S VOICES FROM AROUND THE STATE

The Office on the Economic Status of Women (OESW) is a non-partisan office under the Legislative Coordinating Commission. OESW's statutory mandate is to "study and report to the legislature on all matters relating to the economic status of women in Minnesota...." (*Minnesota Statutes 3.303*) To do this better, I spent much of June traveling around the state and having "listening sessions" with organizations and individuals who work on women's economic issues. My purpose was to gain insight into priority women's economic issues in different regions of Minnesota and learn what initiatives are successful at helping women achieve economic security and what remain as concerns that need to be addressed.

I held listening sessions in Duluth, Hibbing, Grand Rapids, Red Wing, Hutchinson, Willmar, Alexandria, and Fergus Falls. In total, 40 people participated in the sessions, representing 33 different organizations. (*See Appendix for a list of organizations.*) A few private citizens also attended.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS?

It was striking that women's economic issues of concern were the same in every region. Transportation, affordable and available childcare, need for a skilled labor force, affordable housing, poverty, poverty and isolation of elderly women. Nowhere was a lack of jobs mentioned. Rather, the ability of women (and men) to take advantage of a robust job market was hindered by lack of necessary skills, difficulty in finding affordable and available childcare, and transportation issues.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation was the main issue of concern in almost every region. Many counties in Greater Minnesota tend to have a single taxi service (an expensive mode of transportation) and an inadequate bus service in the county seat, and once-daily bus service across the county. This transportation scenario plays itself out in many ways:

- No public transportation is available for second- and third-shift workers.
- Low income families often don't have cars, or have unreliable cars. The high price of gas also curtails the affordability of private transportation for people of low or modest incomes.
- Parents, especially single mothers, often rely on public transportation to take their children to childcare in the morning. It's almost unworkable to take your child on a bus to childcare, drop the child off, wait for the next bus, and get to work on time, especially in a small city

Heard in Fergus Falls: the most common MFIP request is for money for gas.

where bus service is limited. An added complication is the reluctance or refusal of buses and taxis to allow baby strollers.

- High cost of housing in population centers results in low-income families settling in small towns where housing is more affordable. This leaves the expensive and logistically difficult problem of finding transportation to work in the population center.
- Transportation also affects health care. The Douglas County Senior Services Office spoke of an elderly woman who sought their help in finding transportation for several medical appointments in the Twin Cities for eye surgery. They could only cobble together a complex, time-consuming, and expensive (\$200/trip) solution, too demanding and expensive for the elderly woman.
- The Fergus Falls Adult Basic Education representatives spoke of the unintended consequences of a recent switch to a computer-based testing system for a GED certificate. The result was that the GED testing center in Fergus Falls, as was the case in many areas of the state, was no longer certified for the GED test; the nearest GED testing center to Fergus Falls is now Wahpeton, ND, a distance of 27 miles. Low income people might not have transportation options to get to Wahpeton.
- Transportation is also a problem for accessing many support services, like food shelves, and for low income people to go to farmers markets, which are conducive to purchase of healthy foods. EBTs (Electronic Benefit Transfer cards—the method of delivery of SNAP benefits) are now accepted at many farmers markets, yet nationally, only 2% of SNAP purchases are made at farmers markets. Transportation is undoubtedly one of the reasons.

Heard in Grand Rapids: Low-income residents of rural Itasca County take the once-daily bus to the food shelf in Grand Rapids, and wait in the cold for the return trip many hours later.

CHILD CARE

Undependable and unaffordable childcare directly affect a woman's ability to get and retain a job, and often to progress up the career ladder. Disruptions in childcare cause parents to miss work, come in late, leave early, and lose concentration at work. Minnesota has the third highest childcare costs in the country.¹ The cost of Minnesota accredited center-based childcare for one infant is 89% of the median income of a single mother.²

¹ National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Network, *Parents and the High Price of childcare, 2010 Update*. http://www.naccrra.org/sites/default/files/default_site_pages/2011/cost_report_2011_full_report_0.pdf accessed 7 July 2014.

² University of MN Humphrey School's Center on Women & Public Policy, in partnership with the Women's Foundation of MN, *Status of Women & Girls in Minnesota, Research Overview*. June 2014.

Concern about the cost and the availability of childcare is pervasive—it was heard in every region of the state and from all session participants. Sometimes participants voiced the concerns of the clients of the government agency or nonprofit they represent. Most often, however, participants chimed in with their personal experience. Many participants were themselves single mothers, being paid low wages and struggling with affordability, availability and transportation issues. Sometimes participants were financially stable males, who spoke of the high cost of childcare for their families and the difficulty of finding reliable, quality childcare, especially childcare for infants or during hours outside normal work hours.

These are the individual comments on childcare:

- Women sometimes have to quit jobs because they can't afford childcare.
- Childcare options are needed for non-standard hours and for children with disabilities. Infant care is particularly hard to find.
- Sick children or unexpected school closings (e.g., snow days) more often than not leave working parents with no back-up childcare. (Sometimes the sick children are those of a home-based childcare provider, causing her to temporarily close her service.) Paid sick leave would be a great help to working parents in covering these situations.
- Transportation is a childcare issue. Low-income families may not have a dependable car and must rely on public transportation to take their children to childcare. Not only are bus schedules often not conducive to this, but buses—and taxis—may not allow baby strollers. Public transportation is not readily available in Greater Minnesota. This is even more pronounced for shift work.

There is a waiting list for qualified childcare in Range Cities. Douglas County Social Service hasn't been able to spend all of its childcare assistance funds during the last few years. There is no waiting list for childcare assistance in this county.

There was also widespread dissatisfaction with requirements and forces that, in the opinion of session participants, unnecessarily drive up the cost of childcare:

- Unionization of childcare workers.
- State rules and regulations for childcare providers that, in the opinion of session participants, are unnecessary and unreasonable, in some cases causing providers to go out of business. For example, the limit on the number of children.

JOBS

Workforce development is a big issue throughout Minnesota. No region said, “There is a lack of jobs.” Jobs were abundant; the problem is that the workforce doesn’t have the necessary skills. Employers throughout Greater Minnesota particularly need workers with welding skills. Healthcare workers were also in demand, particularly in the Fergus Falls area.

Minnesota Median Hourly Wage

Welders	\$18.95
LPNs	\$19.98
Nursing Assistants	\$13.00
Home Health Aides	\$11.17
PCAs	\$10.88

(MN DEED data)

- It is difficult finding students interested in training for available jobs. Flexible training hours and arrangements are needed to fit the lifestyle and needs of mothers. There is a need to help young girls understand their career options.
- Soft skills of job seekers are low.
- Training programs for skilled labor should be shorter.
- The GED certification recently switched to a computer-based testing system. This makes it harder for older workers with low computer skills who are laid off and need a GED to get re-employed.

3,400 men work in mining on the Range; 200 women work in mining on the Range, including low-wage clerical workers

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

- The relatively high cost of housing in Greater Minnesota’s population centers (where the jobs generally are) results in low-income individuals and families seeking affordable housing in small towns and rural areas. This leads to the problem of transportation to jobs, schools, health care, food shelves, and other necessary services.
- Requiring rental and credit histories for affordable rental housing creates a problem for some low-income families and individuals.
- It is hoped that new housing developments made possible by 2014 state legislation will achieve the goal of affordable housing for the low-income populace. Results should be closely monitored.

Red Wing has 51 affordable rental units for every 100 low-income

POVERTY

There are two resonant themes surrounding women and poverty: single mothers and older women. Underlying causes include the usual suspects of the gender pay gap: Women tend to work in low-paying occupations (it can be argued that society undervalues occupations traditionally held by women, e.g., caregiving occupations); women work part-time, or leave the workforce, or take less demanding and consequently lower paying jobs because of the demands of family caregiving—whether it be mothers caring for young children or baby boomer women caring for aging parents or spouses.

A home healthcare worker on the Range—a single mother—works three jobs, yet still isn't able to make ends meet. She just got a fourth job.

- The MFIP benefit level hasn't increased since 1985.
- Minnesota workers should be able to earn a livable wage. Raising the minimum wage is key to enable women and families to rise out of poverty. However, session participants also worried that raising the minimum wage might cause low-wage workers to lose more in public assistance benefits than they make in the wage increase.
- Hunger is perceived as “a woman's issue.”

Heard in Alexandria: Community support services encounter lots of poverty, sexual assault, and domestic violence.

A number of session participants, though they were attending in their capacity of representing nonprofits and government agencies that work on women's economic issues, were themselves low-wage earners and single mothers. They personally struggle greatly with virtually all the issues being discussed.

Heard in Grand Rapids: Women's work is undervalued—and nonprofits are also guilty of this. Grand Rapids reports that hospital employees (many of whom are women), who generally are low-wage, use food shelves and can't afford to pay for the health insurance the hospital offers its employees.

Heard in Grand Rapids: The “have nots”—the poor, minorities, victims of domestic violence—are often invisible.

OLDER WOMEN

The median annual retirement income of Minnesota women over age 65 is less than \$13,000 (2007 data).³ When the topic of older women was broached, session participants in all areas agreed that older women in their region often live in poverty. It does not appear, however, to be a priority for action.

- Older women often must choose between food and medication, because they can't afford both.
- Transportation and home maintenance are problems for older women.
- The advantages of "telehealth" (long distance health care) are important for older women. Thus, high speed broadband access is important for older women in Greater Minnesota.

Heard in Grand Rapids: Many older women who live on social security come to the food shelf.

Heard in Hibbing: There is a problem on the Range with seniors not being able to sell their homes.

AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN

Session participants in the Duluth area spoke of the particular disadvantages of American Indian Women.

- Sex trafficking is a big issue for American Indian women in northeast Minnesota.
- American Indian women generally do not participate in adult basic education offered by the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA).
- There is great discrimination on the Range against American Indians.

"American Indian women are invisible."

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

By and large, with some notable exceptions, men predominate in positions of local political power—city councils and county boards.

³ Minnesota Women's Consortium and Wider Opportunities for Women, *Elders Living on the Edge*, 2009. http://www.wowonline.org/ourprograms/eesi/state-resources/documents/MNPolicyBrief_FINAL.pdf accessed 9 July 2014.

- We need more women in office. For example, there are no women on the Itasca County Board, the Mayor of Grand Rapids is a man, and there is one woman on the Grand Rapids City Council. Women are hesitant to run for office; they need to be asked multiple times.

SEXUAL ASSAULT, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- The Range area needs more organizations that address domestic violence. The Grand Rapids/Itasca County area also reports there is little access for women victims of violence to support services—housing, transportation, jobs with livable wages.
- Session participants in the Grand Rapids area linked domestic violence to the general culture in their region of not valuing women or the work women do. They believe widespread use of derogatory language with respect to women is a contributing cause to violence against women.

WHAT IS WORKING WELL? WHAT ARE OTHER SOLUTIONS?

There are many volunteer, nonprofit, and government programs that session participants report are working well, though these programs aren't funded and wide-spread enough to solve the problems. Participants felt strongly that citizens, nonprofits and private business want to solve problems locally, working together to craft creative solutions to their problems. Rarely did participants call for government intervention, though in a few instances they did.

“Nonprofits, the Chamber of Commerce, and government have intersecting goals: find good jobs for workers and find good workers.”

TRANSPORTATION

- A number of areas had programs to give donated cars to low-income individuals and families, and to provide low-cost car repairs. One such program is the [Douglas County Car Care Program \(DCCCP\)](#), a nonprofit corporation that is faith-based and represents a community coalition of social service agencies and faith based social ministries helping people who are challenged with transportation barriers to rising out of poverty. DCCCP is only for county residents, and is staffed by volunteers. It arose out of a similar program, [Free To Be, Inc.](#), in Anoka County. Eligible people in the Fergus Falls area can purchase affordable cars through West Central Minnesota Communities Action.
- Barrel of Fun (a 1,200-employee Perham company) will bus employees daily from Alexandria to Perham (76 miles).
- The Minnesota Department of Human Services used to have funding to accept donated cars and give them to MFIP recipients. (There were tax incentives for donors of cars for this

program.) Heartland Community Action Agency, in Willmar, has a small program to do something similar.

- DEED’s Workforce Centers are in the process of getting certified as testing centers for the new GED tests. This will help ease the transportation problems for low-income people who need a GED to find employment.
- Session participants suggest the legislature provide grants to Greater Minnesota for rural transportation and tax benefits for companies that provide employee transportation.

CHILDCARE

- Paid sick leave would help parents take care of their children when they are sick or there is an unexpected day off school, without cutting into their paychecks or jeopardizing their jobs.
- The state should ease requirements for home-based childcare.
- The legislature should provide incentives for employers to develop creative solutions to their employees’ childcare needs.
- Churches should use their facilities to offer childcare for parishioners.
- The legislature should exempt childcare providers from state income tax, placing a cap on childcare rates in exchange for the exemption. Session participants doubted this would be a big tax loss for the state and believed it would be a powerful incentive for increased childcare options.

JOBS

- The Lake Superior School District in Two Harbors, assisted by a Women’s Foundation of Minnesota grant, offers girls-only industrial technology classes. This high school program feeds into Mesabi Range Community College. The Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA), a Community Action Program in northeastern Minnesota, trains women and high school girls in the trades.

25% of graduates from Mesabi Range Engineering School are females.

- Job training should be flexible (e.g. schedule, location) in order to fit the needs of mothers.

Northshore Mining held a career day for women only.

- AEOA has a [“Disparity Project”](#) to help people of color train for and find employment. Local organizations, like the Rotary Club, and employers, like Max Gray Construction and U.S. Steel, are involved in this project.

- AEOA’s Adult Basic Education offers a paid internship program. The problem is getting unions to hire women in AEOA’s paid internship program.
- The City of Winstead has a manufacturing skills gap: their employers need welders. This fall, Dunwoody College of Technology will open a welding training center in Winstead. It will be a three-month certification program. Local business is involved with the Dunwoody effort, not government. There is a need to make women aware of this opportunity.
- Fergus Falls Adult Basic Education has a program to help college students pass anatomy and physiology—core courses to prepare for the abundant health care jobs in the area. Most of the students are women.

DEED’s Workforce Centers can help pay for a person’s Adult Basic Education program.
- Minnesota’s [FasTRAC](#) program is perceived as very successful. FasTRAC is a collaboration among state, local, and national partners to help educationally underprepared adults succeed in well-paying careers by integrating basic skills education and career-specific training in fields where new skills are in high demand.
- The City of Fergus Falls offers scholarship money for GED certification: one scholarship is for men and one for women.
- Superior Industries, in Morris, has many openings for assembly welders, leading them to start an in-house welding training center for current and new employees.
- LB Homes, a Fergus Falls company that offers senior living options, long term care, hospice and home health care services, has a need for Nursing Assistants and LPNs. LB Homes can’t compete on wages with some of the other health care facilities in the area, so they have turned to creative incentives to attract employees, 90% of whom are women. They pay an extra \$5/hr. (basic starting wage for a Nursing Assistant is \$11.34/hr.) for weekend shifts. They pay tuition for Nursing Assistant training. They are discussing the possibility of offering Nursing Assistant training through high school.
- The West Central Initiative has a [Rural Family Economic Success](#) program, which helps families build financial assets (helping low income individuals and families file for Earned Income Tax Credit and offering “financial fitness” education), access childcare and early childhood education programs, and train for and find jobs.
- Local businesses should give schools funding for programs to help young girls understand career options in non-traditional, high-wage occupations.
- Industrial technology should be taught in high school. High schools, colleges, and industry should work in cooperation to prepare students for in-demand, skilled jobs.

Heard in Hibbing: Hibbing City College does a great job recruiting and training students for jobs.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

- Barrel of Fun, a large Perham corporation, offers a \$10,000 housing loan to employees who have been with them for three years.

POVERTY

- Full-time workers should be paid a livable wage. Raising the minimum wage is a good start to helping people escape poverty.
- AFL-CIO Community Services and United Way Partnership in Duluth has an emergency fund, allowing \$300 per member per year for individuals who need emergency help.
- Front-end intervention is needed to keep people out of the public assistance system.
- MFIP should place higher priority on education and job training, allowing more flexible opportunities for recipients to pursue education. Low-income people need support systems while they are gaining education. It is a positive step that the 2014 Minnesota Legislature eliminated the MFIP restriction on four-year education plans.
- The federal Community Nutrition Education (CNE), offered through the University of Minnesota Extension Service, provides education for low-income people on healthy eating on a budget. Recent cuts in federal funding have resulted in extensive lay-offs of the University Extension Service nutrition workers.
- Women in Greater Minnesota can achieve economic security through entrepreneurship. Tastefully Simple, a national award-winning company with annual sales of \$82 million and 200 employees, was started by an Alexandria woman in her home and remains based in Alexandria.

OLDER WOMEN

- Meals on Wheels is important as a check on the well-being of the elderly who live at home.
- Health care providers need to communicate with each other to coordinate medications for the elderly. This may necessitate changes to medical data privacy laws.
- There should be adequate compensation for family caregivers.
- There is a need to educate older women on social security benefits if they are divorced.

The Eveleth City Police will check on seniors who live alone.

Heard in Red Wing: Seniors in Red Wing and Goodhue County have better transportation than non-elderly, low-wage residents, due to volunteer and nonprofit organizations that provide transportation to seniors.

APPENDIX: Organizations Represented at the OESW Listening Sessions

- Alexandria:** Alexandria Technical and Community College
DEED Vocational Rehabilitation Services
Douglas County Senior Services
Douglas County Social Services
Douglas County Veterans Service Office
Private citizen
Someplace Safe
United Way of Douglas and Pope Counties
West Central Minnesota Communities Action
West Central Minnesota Communities Action PLUS Kids Program
- Duluth:** AFL-CIO Community Services and United Way Partnerships
League of Women Voters Duluth
- Fergus Falls:** Fergus Falls Adult Basic Education
Fergus Falls Daily Journal
Fergus Falls Economic Improvement Commission
LB Homes
Rural Minnesota CEP, Inc.
- Grand Rapids:** Itasca County Health and Human Services
Second Harvest North Central Food Bank
Take Action Minnesota
- Hibbing:** Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency
Express Employment Professionals
- Hutchinson:** Southwest Initiative Foundation
- Red Wing:** Goodhue County Health and Human Services
Hope Coalition
League of Women Voters Red Wing
Private citizen
Red Wing Area Seniors
Red Wing Republican Eagle
United Way of Goodhue, Wabasha and Pierce Counties
- Willmar:** DEED, Willmar Workforce Center
Heartland Community Action Agency
Kandiyohi County Health and Human Services
MET, Inc.
University of Minnesota-Extension