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YOUR VIEW: TANYA MECK

Work Of Women's Commission Remains Vital

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Are equality and equal opportunity for women an extravagance? As the state grapples with budget cuts, it is natural — and right — that all expenditures be, in the governor's words — "on the table." As our leaders seek cuts, however, they would be wise to keep in mind the long-term consequences of their decisions.

One of the cuts under consideration is the General Assembly's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. But to eliminate this commission would be extremely shortsighted. The commission's work is wide-ranging and deep, and it is needed now more than ever.

The commission is charged by state statute with working on "all matters concerning women." It is like a good insurance policy that covers pre-existing conditions and the unforeseen. To cancel this policy because we feel healthy now — or because in tough times we think it's expendable — is to jeopardize the future of 51 percent of the population. Contrary to critics of the commission, inequality is a serious condition that affects women every day.

In Connecticut, we understand insurance. We also know that prevention is almost always more cost effective than treating an illness once it has progressed. Providing sexual harassment training to state agencies, businesses and other groups costs far less than later litigation. Making sure that women can afford a mammogram saves the state and its taxpayers the costs of an uninsured woman's seeking treatment for advanced breast cancer. Strengthening programs that give women access to careers in construction bolsters the middle class and cuts down on state-subsidized unemployment benefits because, unlike the service sector work done largely by women, jobs in the trades pay a living wage.

These are only a few examples of the many ways that the commission serves women and their families, while saving state and taxpayer dollars.

If our 35 years of experience have taught us anything, it's that new challenges always arise and often can't be predicted. For example, 30 years ago few could have imagined the rise of human trafficking — the inhumane epidemic affecting women and children in Connecticut. Always one step ahead, the commission convened and chairs the Trafficking in Persons Council, which coordinates state and local efforts to prevent trafficking and protect its victims.

This is but one example of a relatively new problem that joins the litany of long-standing conditions that put women's economic security, health and safety at risk. When the commission was formed in 1973, women made about 55 cents for every dollar earned by a man. Today, that figure is at 77 cents. Progress, to be sure, but certainly not parity.

No one associated with the commission considers it untouchable. We recognize the need to economize. Women, who have traditionally handled most of the household finances, are used to making do with what's available. But eliminating or merging the commission would be disastrous: Who will raise the all-important questions of accountability? Right now, the commission is the only state institution that evaluates laws and policies for their impact on women and their families.

Women will need the commission as an advocate as long as they are paid less than men, suffer from sexual harassment, are denied access to the seats of power in government and business and continue to serve as chief caregivers in most families — a role which results in more lost work time, fewer promotions and less Social Security. And because women, on average, outlive men, they are more apt to live in poverty in their old age.

Some voices, have called upon the legislature to take a hard look at the numbers. The commission's annual allotment of \$1,059,710 breaks down to 77 cents for each of Connecticut's 1,399,625 women over the age of 18. This doesn't include young girls, who surely deserve the same opportunities as their brothers and male classmates. It's hard to imagine that any woman's health, safety and financial security aren't worth at least a dollar. Is 77 cents per woman an extravagant insurance policy? I'd say it's money well spent — even a bargain.

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