

Guide to Starting a County Commission for Women

A step-by-step resource for establishing a local advisory
body to elevate women's voices in government



Pennsylvania
**Governor's Advisory
Commission on Women**

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A local or county Commission for Women is a powerful, practical way to ensure that the voices, experiences, and needs of women and girls are reflected in local decision making. These commissions serve as trusted advisory bodies to elected officials, connectors across sectors, and catalysts for policy and programmatic change.

This guide walks you step by step through why to start a Commission for Women, how to establish one, and provides ready-to-use sample language, including bylaws, a request for county support, and member recruitment samples.

Key Benefits to Starting a Commission for Women

1. Elevates women's voices in local government

A Commission for Women provides a formal, ongoing mechanism for identifying issues impacting women and girls and advising county leaders with lived experience and data-informed insight.

2. Strengthens policy and programs

Commissions can review policies through a gender lens, recommend improvements, and highlight gaps related to economic security, health, safety, caregiving, education, and civic participation.

3. Builds cross-sector collaboration

Members often come from nonprofit, business, education, healthcare, advocacy, and community backgrounds. This creates a built-in network for collaboration and creative problem-solving.

4. Creates leadership pathways

Commissions cultivate local leadership, particularly for women who may not otherwise see themselves reflected in public decision making spaces.

5. Signals public commitment to equality

Establishing a Commission for Women demonstrates that the county values representative governance and is committed to improving outcomes for all residents.

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Examples of Activities for a Commission for Women

These activities allow a Commission for Women to inform decision-makers, elevate community voices, and improve local outcomes without engaging in political campaigning or advocacy for specific candidates or parties.

A Commission for Women is an advisory and community-focused body, not a political organization. Its work centers on research, engagement, education, and practical problem-solving to improve the lives of women and families in the community.

Community Listening and Engagement

- Hosting listening sessions, town halls, or focus groups to hear directly from women and girls about their experiences and needs
- Convening roundtables with community organizations, service providers, and residents
- Creating safe spaces for women to share barriers they face related to work, health care, caregiving, housing, or safety

Research and Assessment

- Designing, distributing, and analyzing surveys on local issues affecting women
- Collecting qualitative stories and lived-experience data to complement county statistics
- Reviewing county data and reports to identify gender-based gaps or trends

Advisory and Reporting Work

- Presenting findings and recommendations to county commissioners, departments, and boards
- Producing bi-annual or issue-based reports on the status of women and girls in the county
- Reviewing existing county policies and programs through a gender equality lens

Education and Awareness

- Hosting workshops, panels, or speaker series on topics such as economic security, maternal health, caregiving, domestic violence, or workforce participation
- Sharing information about available resources and services for women and families
- Partnering with libraries, schools, and community centers to provide educational programming

Partnership and Collaboration

- Working with nonprofits, hospitals, employers, faith groups, and advocacy organizations to identify service gaps
- Supporting coordination between agencies that serve women and families
- Helping pilot community-based solutions

Community Outreach and Capacity-Building

- Developing toolkits or resource guides for women in the county
- Supporting leadership development, mentoring, and civic engagement opportunities
- Hosting recognition events to highlight women leaders, volunteers, and organizations



Step-by-Step: How to Start a Commission for Women

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Step 1: Build Initial Interest and Champions

Begin by convening a small group of stakeholders who care about women's issues. Consider advocates, service providers, business leaders, educators, or engaged residents. Identify at least one county commissioner or senior staff member who may be open to sponsoring or supporting the effort.

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Step 2: Define the Purpose and Scope

Clarify early that the Commission is advisory, not regulatory. A clear mission helps elected officials understand the value of the body and helps members stay focused.

Example purpose:

To inform and advise County Commissioners on issues affecting women and girls and to increase awareness of barriers and opportunities impacting their lives.

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Step 3: Secure County Authorization

Most county Commissions for Women are formally established by resolution or motion by the County Commissioners. This provides legitimacy, clarity, and continuity beyond individual election cycles.

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Step 4: Adopt Bylaws

Bylaws provide structure, transparency, and accountability. They clarify membership, terms, leadership roles, meeting requirements, and ethical boundaries. Next you will find sample bylaw language, modeled on an established county Commission for Women, that can be adapted to local needs.

Sample Bylaws - Adaptable Template

Mission Statement

The Commission for Women seeks to increase opportunities for women and girls in the county by identifying issues of concern, promoting awareness, and advising County Commissioners on policies and practices that impact women's lives.

Article I: Membership

- The Commission shall consist of no more than 25 members.
- Members are appointed by the County Board of Commissioners, through recommendations made by the Commission.
- Members should be broadly representative of women in the county, reflecting varied backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Article II: Terms

- Members serve three-year terms.
- Members may serve no more than two consecutive terms, with eligibility for reappointment after a one-year hiatus.
- Vacancies are filled through recommendations by the Commission to County Commissioners.

Article III: Meetings

- The Commission shall meet at least four times per year.
- Meetings are open to the public and conducted in accordance with applicable sunshine or open meetings laws.
- A majority of members present constitutes a quorum.

Article IV: Officers

- Officers may include: Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Membership Chair, and Communications Chair.
- Officers are elected annually by the Commission.
- The Chair presides over meetings and appoints committees.

Article V: Committees

- Standing and ad hoc committees may be formed to advance the Commission's mission.
- A Membership Committee oversees recruitment and leadership development.

Article VI: Political Activity

- The Commission may engage in issue and legislative advocacy consistent with its mission.
- The Commission shall not endorse political candidates or engage in partisan campaign activity.

Article VII: Amendments

- Bylaws may be amended by a two-thirds vote of members present, with advance notice.



Sample Language: Requesting County Commissioner Support

Subject: Request to Establish a County Commission for Women

Dear Commissioner [Last Name],

We are writing to request your support in establishing a [County Name] Commission for Women to serve as a volunteer advisory body that would inform and advise the County Commissioners on issues impacting women and girls in our community.

Across Pennsylvania and the country, Commissions for Women serve as effective partners to local government by elevating community perspectives, identifying policy gaps, and strengthening outcomes related to economic security, health, safety, and civic engagement. A Commission in [County Name] would provide a structured, nonpartisan forum to bring forward data, lived experience, and practical recommendations.

We respectfully request the opportunity to discuss this proposal and explore the adoption of a resolution formally establishing the Commission. We believe this initiative would strengthen governance and demonstrate the County's commitment to serving all residents.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[Name(s)]

[Contact Information]

Sample Language: Recruiting Commission Members

Option 1: Community Call for Applications

Are you passionate about improving opportunities for women and girls in [County Name]? Consider applying to serve on the [County Name] Commission for Women.

Commission members serve as volunteers who advise County Commissioners on issues affecting women, help identify community needs, and collaborate on solutions that strengthen our county. We are seeking applicants from varied backgrounds, professions, and lived experiences.

Applicants should live or work in [County Name] and have an interest in community engagement and public service.

To apply, please submit [application details] by [deadline].



Option 2: Targeted Outreach Email

Dear [Name],

I'm reaching out to invite you to consider applying for the newly forming [County Name] Commission for Women. The Commission will serve as an advisory body to County Commissioners, bringing forward community perspectives and recommendations on issues impacting women and girls.

Your experience and leadership would be a valuable addition to this work, and we would welcome your application or help sharing this opportunity with others who may be interested.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to our county.

Warm regards,
[Name]

How to Write a Strong Application for Your Commission

A well-designed application helps both applicants to present themselves clearly and the appointing authority to evaluate fit, capacity, and alignment with the Commission's mission.

1. Include Core Elements

- Full Name
- Preferred Pronouns (optional)
- Mailing Address
- Phone Number
- Email Address
- Residency confirmation checkbox

2. Background and Qualifications

- Brief biographical statement (e.g., "Tell us about your background and why you want to serve.")
- Professional experience (relevant work, volunteer roles, or community involvement)
- Community/civic engagement (service, leadership, or advocacy work)

3. Interest in the Commission

- Why they want to serve on the Commission
- What issues they care about most
- Specific skills or perspectives they would bring

4. Availability and Commitment

- Are you able to attend quarterly meetings and committee assignments?
- Are you willing to serve a full term of 3 years?
- Do you have any scheduling limitations we should know about?

5. Optional - Additional Materials

- A resume
- A brief references list (optional)
- A cover letter expressing interest

Evaluation and Follow-Up

Prior to sending out a request for applications, establish a review committee (led by a Membership Chair) to vet or score applications and bring them to the full Commission for a vote. Be sure to notify applicants of the status of their application and next steps, such as an interview, the voting meeting, and orientation schedules.

It is recommended that this process is followed moving forward. All new applications should go to the Membership Committee for review. The Membership Committee should review all applications, conduct initial interviews, and make recommendations to the full Commission for a vote. If a new member receives a majority of votes, the recommendation goes to the County Commissions for the final vote.

Final Tips for Success

-  Start small and grow intentionally.
-  Prioritize a wide range of representation from the beginning.
-  Maintain clear boundaries around nonpartisanship.
-  Communicate regularly with County Commissioners and the public.
-  Celebrate early wins to build momentum and visibility!

Next Step

Adapt the sample bylaws and letters to reflect your county's structure and legal requirements, then request a meeting with County leadership to begin the formal establishment process.

Once you've established your Commission, please notify the Governor's Advisory Commission on Women (women@pa.gov) so that we may stay in touch on issues impacting women and girls across the state.