

NH Commission on the Status of Men

Public Meeting: September 29, 2004
1:00-4:00 PM @ Legislative Office Building, Room 208, Concord

Minutes taken by Scott Garman

Commission Members Present: Gerard Boyle, Joseph Mastromarino, Larry Colby, Michael Geanoulis, and Scott Garman

Secretary's Report: Chairman Boyle opened the meeting noting that the August meeting minutes have been approved by the Commission via e-mail.

Treasurer's Report: Larry Colby noted that our Treasury received a \$100 donation from an anonymous benefactor. There have been no expenditures since the last meeting. He is continuing to work on getting stationery and business cards. The Commission will be following the format and style of office supplies that the Commission on the Status of Women uses.

Communications: Gerard Boyle received one letter from the public in the past month. It was a carbon copy of a letter that was sent to Henry Mock by Major James M. McFarland. Maj. McFarland took issue with the way he was treated in post-divorce legal action concerning child custody and financial matters. He included a recent article from *Foster's Daily Democrat* about a Rochester judge being suspended after inappropriate behavior at the NH domestic and sexual violence conference. Maj. McFarland believes that judges need to be held more accountable for their actions.

Michael Geanoulis noted that there was a letter to the editor in a recent issue of the *NH Sunday News* from Mike Smith of Portsmouth who took issue with the appointment of Gerard Boyle to Chair the CSM. Mr. Smith believes that having an attorney chair this commission compromises its ability to advocate for reform of the judicial system. Gerard read this letter out loud and then defended the work of the Commission. Specifically, charges that the Commission's work is somehow "anti-male" (in the words of Mr. Smith) were totally unfounded.

Web Site Update: Scott Garman has updated the web site with the past two months meeting minutes. He also added a page to the site with instructions on how the public can make donations to the Commission. Finally, he agreed to complete digital editing of the testimony by Dr. Murray Straus and post audio files of the presentation on our web site by the next meeting.

Suicide Study: Joseph Mastromarino reports that there have been scheduling difficulties

trying to arrange another meeting with the State Medical Examiner's office. The office has continued to gather new data on suicides according to our template, and Joe will arrange a meeting with Tom Andrews in the next month. Joe will use e-mail to keep other Commissioners up to date on the planned meeting so they can attend if desired.

Milton Burnett, PhD, a psychologist from the Seacoast Mental Health Center, has expressed interest in serving on this Commission to take the place of Ron Blankenstein. Dr. Brunett has been encouraged to re-submit his application to the Governor, and Gerry will follow up with Joe Dion from the Governor's office to stay informed about potential candidates.

Chuck Rhodes was going to give a presentation on men's health issues to the Commission, but could not attend the meeting at the last minute.

Upcoming Conferences: Larry Colby opened a discussion on some upcoming conferences related to the importance of fathers. He passed out a proposed outline for the Sixth Annual New England Fathering Conference to be held in Boston, MA. The four arenas of the conference will include: Fathers in the Legal System, Fathers in the Community, Fathers in Education, and Fathers and Health. For each arena, there will be a keynote speaker, a panel discussion, and a series of five workshops. Gerry Boyle has agreed to give a presentation, most likely in the Fathers in the Legal System arena of the conference.

On February 17, 2005, another fatherhood conference is being planned to be held in Concord, NH. The location will be at the Brown building, and Scott Noyes will be giving the keynote. This conference does not have a title yet, but would be fatherhood-oriented (ie, "Fathers Count"). Head Start is helping to sponsor this event, as is the Health and Human Services Child Development Bureau. It will consist of a keynote followed by a series of breakout sessions.

Lee Newman from VIP/SAFE-NH was unable to make the meeting at the last minute, but is still interested in co-sponsoring a conference with the CSM on men's issues in NH. Further discussion on this was put on hold until the next meeting.

Education Statistics: Scott Garman has been working to obtain statistics about the state of young men in education. He has spoken with Sally Fellows from the NH Dept. of Education to obtain dropout statistics for the past three years. Data older than that is of limited use because the ways dropout numbers are measured has changed substantially over time. He has also been in touch with UNH and Keene State College to obtain enrollment statistics broken down by gender. He had spreadsheets of UNH enrollment statistics for the past five years. The ratio of males to females at UNH (combined at all degree levels) has remained roughly 40/60 during this time period.

Mike Geanoulis suggested that we see if universities are making gender enrollment projections and find out what trends they expect to see in the future and why. Gerry Boyle

also suggested obtaining graduation rates at the high school level, as well as getting college entry statistics from the Dept. of Education.

Domestic Violence: Michael Geanoulis started a discussion on what can be done to correct the removal of fathers from their homes based on one-sided testimony (as is done with ex-parte restraining orders).

Rep. David Bickford recalled interviewing a retired police officer who freely admitted that “when in doubt, I arrest the man”.

Michael Geanoulis believes that a large part of the problem is due to the one-sided way the issue is presented by DV organizations and government groups. He quoted examples from a report of the fatality review committee of the Governor's Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence:

"Every year between three and four million women throughout the United States are beaten by their partners...When adult women are beaten, frequently children are beaten as well....In 75% of cases where a woman is abused, children are abused."

Mike took issue with the fact that for these facts and statistics, nothing was said about the abuse of men, and that both men and children can be assaulted by women as well. He believes these portrayals need to be corrected throughout all domestic violence organizations, committees, and related venues to show that DV is an equal opportunity employer, and that both sides of the story should be heard in court before orders are issued by that court.

Rep. Bickford suggested that the most direct way to have a say in the way these reports are written would be to obtain a seat on the Governor's Commission on domestic and sexual violence. Gerry will speak with the governor about getting a member of the CSM onto the DV commission. This was unanimously supported by the other CSM members.

Shared Parenting: Rep. Bickford distributed to the Commission some divorce statistics from 2002 and 2003, which show an overall decline in divorces. However, there has not been any appreciable change in father custody rates. Joint custody cases are going up, but David is not sure how accurate that statistic is given the way “physical custody” can be defined by judges (ie, by issuing joint physical custody but giving “primary residence” to one parent). Rep. Bickford wanted to know if the Commission has a position on shared parenting.

Larry Colby took issue with the idea of 50/50 joint physical custody for preschool-aged children (i.e, 3.5 days per week with each parent). By having two sets of expectations in each home, children learn to act differently depending on the circumstances, which is confusing to them. While he did not have specific studies to refer to, in his own experience Larry feels that young children need consistent routines and expectations in the home.

David Bickford questioned whether a broken home is the factor causing the problem, or whether it necessarily had to do with the residence issue. He pointed out that Larry's concerns were also a reason why people were opposed to daycare when it was starting to become widely used. David also pointed out that there are a number variations for 50/50 joint physical custody that do not have to split up the week for children (i.e, two weeks on/off, etc).

Michael Geanoulis put forward a motion for the Commission to make an official declaration on shared parenting. Rep. Bickford suggested wording from a former bill (HB 298) that was similar to the Legislative intent used in Maine and New Jersey about both parents and the best interests of the child and incorporating it into a recommendation of "rebuttable joint physical custody". After discussion and input from other members, the final wording reads as follows:

The New Hampshire Commission on the Status of Men finds and declares that it should be the public policy of this state that frequent and continuing contact between minor children and both parents if the parents have separated or dissolved their marriage is ordinarily beneficial to the children. This Commission also finds that it is in the public interest as well as to children and families to encourage parents to share the rights and responsibilities of child rearing. This Commission recommends that a rebuttable presumption of joint physical custody should be supported and encouraged.

Scott Garman seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.

Family Law Task Force: Michael Geanoulis brought forward his "minority report" for the TFFL but did not intend to doom it to failure before the fact. It is now his "suggested text" for the TFFL's final report. Mike welcomed feedback from other members of the commission and read his suggestions to the group. A number of his recommendations were modified by Commission members, but there was a lot to the report and so work on it will continue by e-mail and the Commission will approve a final draft by e-mail. The TFFL final report deadline is November 1.

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI): Michael Geanoulis spoke with the director of the NFI about the possibility of the CSM becoming an affiliate organization of the NFI. This would enable the CSM to get free access to the NFI's wide range of literature and public service announcements. However, the NFI has a number of requirements of affiliate organizations that disqualify the CSM, particularly that the affiliating organization be a 501c3 non-profit group. Mike urged the group to consider purchasing some of the NFI's brochures to distribute to public officials in the state. He will look into obtaining samples of these brochures for the Commission to evaluate.

NH Children's Alliance Network (CAN): Michael Geanoulis passed around a printout of an e-mail from the NH CAN regarding a change in the TANF legislation that the group is encouraging members to oppose. The proposed TANF change would divert money from child care programs to marriage and fatherhood promotion programs. It specifically refers these marriage and fatherhood promotion programs as “unproven” methods to help children. Steve Varnum is the public policy director of NH CAN, which is at least partially funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Mike read some of his recent correspondence with Mr. Varnum. Mike would like to see the NH CAN promote fatherhood on an equal basis with child care funding. Mike would like this to encourage the Commission to support fatherhood programs.

It was agreed that before taking any action on this as a Commission that we should look at the TANF bill itself before coming to further conclusions on it.

The meeting adjourned at 4 PM.