



HOUSTON WOMEN'S
COMMISSION

City of Houston Women's Commission
March 2022 Update

Prepared by Beth Matusoff Merfish, Chair

Note from the Commission Chair, Beth Matusoff Merfish:

In the first six months of our work, the inaugural members of the City of Houston Women's Commission have dedicated a tremendous amount of expertise, labor, and time to our task of researching and alleviating the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic on women and their families in Houston. The recommendations and ongoing projects described in this report are evidence of the dedication and talent of commission members. I am exceedingly grateful to commission members for their generosity and their continuing devotion to this cause.

The enthusiasm and energy of commission members were matched by the public response to Mayor Turner's establishment of the commission in August 2021. We heard from many constituent groups, chambers of commerce, and community organizations interested in collaboration, resource-sharing, and complementary visions. The commission welcomes these points of contact and connection.

The work described here was and is made possible by the partnership and leadership of many offices of the City of Houston, including but not limited to Human Resources, the Office of Business Opportunity, the Office for People with Disabilities, the Office of Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence, and the Mayor's Office of Education. As commission members, we are honored to amplify these offices' efforts and benefit from the expertise their occupants bring to our work.

Many of the projects and ideas included in this document are still in formation. I include them here to solicit the input and assistance of readers who share our goals of a more equitable, inclusive environment for women in Houston. We on the commission are eager to partner as we continue to make progress.

Mission and Charge of the City of Houston Women’s Commission:

The commission will advance equality and equity for women in the City of Houston by identifying and addressing disparities in healthcare, employment, safety, and security across communities and industries, both in Houston’s public and private sectors. The commission will develop and propose recommendations, identify gaps in information that need further study, and advise City leaders on how to improve the quality of life for women throughout Houston.

This inaugural year’s charge addresses the disparities that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated for women in the region in areas including job loss, health care and leave coverage, child-care needs, and wage disparities.

Commission Members:

Beth Matusoff Merfish is the Chair of the Department of Liberal Arts, College of Human Sciences and Humanities and Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Houston - Clear Lake. She was a member of the inaugural 2015 class of fellows of New Leaders Council Houston and is an activist with particular interests in reproductive freedom, gender equity, and family-friendly workplace policy. She is a proud mother of two daughters. She collaborated with Council Member Abbie Kamin to propose the commission and serves as Chair.

Carmen Peña Abrego is the Project Manager of Author Events and Literary Initiatives for the Houston Public Library, Office of Systemwide Programs. She is an active member of the Houston Organization of Public Employees and recently was elected to serve on the negotiations team for the union.

Kristy Bridges is the Department Chair of Exceptional Education for Houston Independent School District. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Academic Studies from Sam Houston State University.

Elizabeth Gonzalez Brock is the Vice President, Energy Solutions and Businesses at CenterPoint. In 2019, she served as Chair of the Board of Greater Houston Women’s Chamber of Commerce.

Barbara Burger is President of Chevron Technology Ventures and Vice President of Innovation. She holds a Bachelor’s of Science in Chemistry, a PHD in Chemistry and an MBA in finance.

Elsa Caballero is the President of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Texas with 20 years experience as an organizer, focusing on the needs of workers in the service, healthcare, and public sectors.

Rogene Calvert is a Principal of Outreach Strategies. She was previously Chief of Staff for Houston Mayor’s Pro Tempore Gordan Quan and Director of Personnel and Volunteer

Initiatives for Mayor Bill White. From the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast to the Child Abuse Prevention Network to St. Luke's Episcopal Charities to the Asian Chamber of Commerce, she has helped shape the direction of countless institutions across Houston.

Haley Crain Carter is a former U.S. Marine officer and retired professional women's soccer player. She competed in NCAA Div I soccer at the U.S. Naval Academy and graduated with honors in 2006. After earning her commission, she served nearly eight years as a Marine Corps Logistics Officer, making two combat deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In addition to her degree from the Naval Academy, Carter has an MBA with Distinction from the University of Liverpool and a Juris Doctor from the University of Houston Law Center.

Dr. Lori Choi is a vascular surgeon, creator of a vascular surgery training program at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, and co-founder of *I'll Have What She's Having*, an organization raising funds and awareness for women's healthcare in Houston.

Carvana Cloud is the Director of Community Affairs for Houston Police Department. She holds a JD from South Texas College of Law and is a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. She has also worked in the community around domestic violence response.

Minal Patel Davis Minal Patel Davis currently serves as the Director of the Mayor's Office of Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence and previously served as Special Advisor to the Mayor on Human Trafficking, the first municipal-level position of its kind in the U.S. for 5 years.

Hon. Phyllis Fyre is an Associate Judge for the Houston Municipal Courts. She is the first openly transgender judge appointed in the United States, a U.S Army veteran, a licensed engineer, an attorney, and a prominent activist.

Juliana Garaizar is the Head of Houston Incubator, Vice President of Innovation at Greentown Labs. She was an early stage investment committee chair for Houston Exponential. She holds an MBA in finance/entrepreneurship and is a Kauffman fellow.

Eureka Gilkey is the Executive Director of Project Row Houses, a community-based arts and culture non-profit in Houston's Third Ward. She has over a decade of experience in development, activism, and outreach, and previously served in the Obama Administration.

Elizabeth Gregory directs the Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies Program and the University of Houston Institute for Research on Women, Gender & Sexuality. She is also an English professor and has written three books, has written multiple scholarly articles has her own blog titled Later Motherhood and the Politics & Economics of Women's Work.

Glenda Joe is a Chinese-Irish-Texan business owner, activist, and Asian festival director. Glenda organized her first civil rights rally at age 13 and has since been a prominent voice for the Asian-American community in Houston, serving as a consultant for Asian issues in the Houston Police Department, writing the Asian Merchant's Handbook to reduce interracial conflict in Asian-

owned stores, and investigating hate crimes against Asians, to name a few. Her business, Great Wall Enterprises, is dedicated to helping Asian-Americans and she has done advertising and public awareness campaigns raising awareness for immunizations, voting, and the census that targeted towards the Asian community, especially recent immigrants.

Nancy McGregor is former Special Counsel to the Director of Central Intelligence with decades of non-profit, government, and private sector experience. She has a life-long commitment to advocating for the equitable treatment of women in society.

Jenalia Moreno Co-owner and Producer at The Storyhive. She holds a BA in Journalism from the University of Houston and attended Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She received an SABEW award for a video on Spain's oil industry and a 2015 Bronze Telly Award.

Chau Nguyen is the Chief Public Strategies Officer of the Houston Area Women's Center, a licensed masters social worker, and an expert in strategic communications with 15 years of television journalism experience.

Tanuke Smith is a Customer Service Representative for Samsung with over 19 years of experience providing customer service, training, and management. She is an active volunteer with Texas Organizing Project and Right 2 Justice.

Angie Wiens-Talbert is the Chief Strategy Officer at Planned Parenthood Gulf Coast, where she oversees the development, implementation, and execution of PPGC's strategic vision and initiatives and also leads the Strategic Partnerships division. During her tenure with the organization, she has championed tirelessly for reproductive rights and equitable access to health care in Texas and Louisiana.

Tammi C. Wallace is Co-Founder and President & CEO of the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce with a passion for economic inclusion focused on the LGBTQ+ Business Community. She previously served as Chief Growth Officer at KIPP Houston Public Schools, Chief of Staff to former Texas State Representative Ellen Cohen, and Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Houston Equal Rights Alliance.

Dr. Codi Wiener is a physician performing obstetrical and gynecological services at Texas Children's Hospital. She is a medical advisory board member of *I'll Have What She's Having*, an organization raising funds and awareness for women's healthcare in Houston.

Christine S. Willie is an attorney at Law Office of Christine M. Sampson, PLLC who will bring energy, ideas, and commitment along with decades of professional and legal experience to serve the women of Houston.

Alison Young is the Executive Director - Wealth Advisor for J.P. Morgan Securities. She brings significant financial and board experience, and she aims to ensure Houston is welcoming and inclusive to all, regardless of background or income level.

Structure of the Commission:

There are currently five subcommittees of the commission. These subcommittees often work together on overlapping concerns:

- Career Access: Jena Moreno, Subcommittee Chair
- City Employment Policy: Carmen Pena Abrego, Subcommittee Chair
- Family Life: Chau Nguyen, Subcommittee Chair
- Healthcare: Lori Choi, Subcommittee Chair
- Wage Inequity: Tanuke Smith, Subcommittee Chair

Meeting Schedule:

August 25, 2021: Houston City Council voted to create a permanent City of Houston Women's Commission by city ordinance.

The commission has since met on August 30, 2021, October 1, 2021, and January 13, 2021. Quarterly meetings in 2022 are scheduled for April 11, July 12, and October 6.

Subcommittee on Career Access

Subcommittee Chair: Jena Moreno

Members: Kristy Bridges, Elizabeth Brock, Barbara Burger, Juliana Garaizar, Glenda Joe, Christine S. Willie

The subcommittee's monthly meetings focus on creating opportunities for women in start-ups and new businesses. Subcommittee members are interested in helping women entrepreneurs access capital, find networking opportunities, and compete for government contracts.

Coordination:

This subcommittee is closely tied to the City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity and Director Marsha Murray.

Members of the subcommittee are also collaborating with The Business Ecosystem Alliance for Minorities & Women (BEAMW), local chambers of commerce, and other community organizations.

FUTURE PLANS: Public-facing programs

1. The subcommittee intends to coordinate with the city and partners to create and publicize a resource guide for women entrepreneurs.
2. The subcommittee plans to hold a women's forum. This could take a number of forms: A City of Houston day for women entrepreneurs, a Teach Rodeo in partnership with Houston Exponential, or others.

Subcommittee on City Employment Policy
Subcommittee Chair: Carmen Peña Abrego
Members: Eureka Gilkey, Nancy McGregor, Alison Young

The city of Houston has more than 22,000 employees. The Subcommittee on City Employment Policy primarily coordinates with representatives of the 22 departments within municipal government. Mayor Turner's support for the Women's Commission and city employees' interests in this work have paved the way for strong collaboration and enabled us to be productive during the first six-month period of the commission's work, leading to the specific policy recommendations listed below.

Subcommittee projects and recommendations:

RECOMMENDED: City of Houston Paid Parental Leave Policy

The commission has taken seriously Mayor Turner's charge to develop an equitable, progressive parental leave policy for city employees. Through the leadership of Commission Chair Beth Merfish and the dedication of Councilmember Kamin, HR Director Cheeks, Finance Director Emo, and others, we have provided feedback on a draft policy HR formulated.

We are happy to support the resulting draft policy that offers new parents who have worked for the City of Houston for at least six months to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave after the birth, adoption, or placement of a foster-to-adopt child. We are hopeful that this policy will be adopted by the city and look forward to the ways in which this investment in women in the City of Houston will make city employment more accessible and welcoming to the talented women of Houston.

RECOMMENDED: City of Houston Pre-Natal and Infant Wellness Leave Policy

The COVID19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities in healthcare access. This is painfully clear in data regarding maternal mortality; the National Center for Health Statistics recently reported that maternal deaths in the United States rose 14% during the first year of the pandemic. The most rapidly increasing rates of maternal mortality are those for Black and Hispanic women. Regular face to face contact with a medical care provider is a major factor in reducing maternal mortality risks; this proposed city policy will enable city employees the time to access necessary medical care and resources both before and after childbirth. In addition, the policy allows for time from this bank to be used to infant wellness, a further investment in new parents as employees of our city.

IN DISCUSSION: City Partners Family Leave Challenge

In keeping with our mission to both review policy for the city and bring the city's policy to private partners, we propose a challenge in which we invite them to meet the city's commitment to and investment in its workforce by creating their own policies to allow for the same paid leave opportunities as instituted by the city. We hope to utilize the city's social media and press contacts to issue this challenge.

FUTURE AREAS OF REVIEW:

We have met with HOPE representatives and are interested in further review of flexible workplace (remote work) opportunities. In addition to telecommuting policies, the Commission would like to review how the City of Houston can incentivize City contractors to embrace the values and benefits that the City, itself, is leading the way on.

Subcommittee on Family Life

Subcommittee Chair: Chau Nguyen

Members: Carvana Cloud, Minal Patel Davis, Phyllis Frye

The subcommittee on Family Life has met monthly during the first six months of the commission's work. They have collaborated to produce the following recommendations and are researching their feasibility and procedures for their implementation.

RECOMMENDED: Engage Houston's Philanthropic Community to Create a Houston Women's Foundation

It takes funding to advance equality and equity for women in Houston. Houston's first ever Women's Commission promises bold and audacious recommendations. However, time, talent and treasure, especially treasure, are necessary. Independent of the City of Houston, the private sector could create a non-profit Women's Foundation that would be tasked to support women, girls and the LGBTQ+ community for grant making, to help seed new organizations, and fund current ones, to take up the programmatic ideas put forth by the commission. The HWF would be the home/single entity responsible for carrying out those recommendations.

Key characteristics of this foundation model include participatory grant making involving community members from *all walks of life* serving committees that decide how grant funds are allocated. Funding also should be allocated to organizations that work in all areas of Houston. If they do not exist in certain areas, seed funding should be offered for those willing to set up shop in certain areas of the city. Program funding areas would be decided by the WC as mentioned. Another piece of the foundation would be to focus on policy/research based on its grantee's findings.

The subcommittee is currently connecting with women's foundations around the country to learn about their establishment procedures and best practices and will explore how to engage others throughout Houston.

Subcommittee on Healthcare

Subcommittee Chair: Lori Choi

Members: Rogene Calvert, Angie Talbert, Codi Wiener

The Subcommittee on Healthcare has met monthly during the first six months of the commission's work. The imperative to work on alleviating the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic is particularly urgent for this subcommittee, which prioritizes the following healthcare concerns:

- COVID
- Access to reproductive care, including abortion
- Mental healthcare
- Health equity
- Access to affordable, quality healthcare

RECOMMENDED: Social Media and PR Program

The subcommittee recommends developing a social media program and PR program thru which HWC and subcommittees can directly speak to the public. The need to distribute timely, verified medical and healthcare information has never been more apparent than it has during a pandemic prolonged by misinformation and fear.

IN PROGRESS: Research Regarding Healthcare Providers

The subcommittee is gathering a great deal of information from partners including the Houston Health Department, Harris County Health, Houston's hospital systems and federally qualified health centers, non-profit healthcare organizations, and individual healthcare providers. To that end, the subcommittee has prepared and is distributing a detailed survey which includes questions about providers' marketing practices, funding sources, behavioral medicine care, and responses to COVID19.

IN PROGRESS: The Creation of a Public Health Information Network

The subcommittee has observed repeatedly the need for the City of Houston and its healthcare partners to distribute information and health resources outside of traditional healthcare settings. The subcommittee is working with City of Houston offices to explore using publicly-available data to create health resource and information networks by reaching people outside of healthcare settings, in locations such as daycare centers and preschools.

Subcommittee on Wage Inequity

Subcommittee Chair: Tanuke Smith

Members: Elsa Caballero, Haley Carter, Elizabeth Gregory, Tammi Wallace

This subcommittee is eager to gather information regarding the structures and employer policies that have led to Houston's dramatic gender and racial wage gaps.

IN PROGRESS: Pay Equity Research

The subcommittee has begun meeting with Houston businesses to gather information about their strategies to avoid gender-based wage gaps and to maintain equity in salaries. This is sensitive information, and gathering it requires careful networking and individual meetings.

FUTURE OBJECTIVE: Continued Research

The subcommittee will continue to schedule these meetings and hopes to work with City of Houston HR to learn about the city's wage equity practices.

FUTURE OBJECTIVE: Pay Equity Summit

The subcommittee is interested in organizing a pay equity summit in which industry leaders will meet virtually to share information about their strategies in this area and to develop outlines of best practices. This information will be collected by the subcommittee without attribution in order to maintain the confidentiality of these groups while allowing the subcommittee to make broader recommendations around pay equity.

The summit would also include a public address by an expert who has successfully worked toward pay equity.