



Sarah Standiford and the Maine Women's Policy Center Working Toward Prosperity for All

Part of "Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine"

Written by Jessica Thomas

Sarah Standiford is changing Maine. As executive director of the Maine Women's Policy Center and its sister organization, the Maine Women's Lobby, Standiford and her staff work tirelessly to make life better for women and girls statewide. They employ a twofold approach: enacting groundbreaking public policy to improve women's lives, and empowering women to create change in their own communities. "We don't simply advocate for women and girls. We also teach them to advocate for themselves through local and legislative action," explains Standiford.

The MWPC organizes and trains women to speak up and participate more fully in their government. The organization also offers experiential programs such as Girls' Day at the State House, giving Maine eighth-graders

a chance to see the legislative process up close, from meetings with legislators to mock hearings and press conferences. These training programs, says Standiford, "make the pathways to change visible" for participants, who come away with a deeper understanding of what's at stake and what they can do about it. By working with the women who are directly affected by the policies the MWPC is implementing, they are creating tomorrow's active leaders.

"There is a great tradition in Maine of encouraging the next generation to step up to leadership," Standiford says, crediting role models including Margaret Chase Smith, Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins, Chellie Pingree, Libby Mitchell, Hannah Pingree and Beth Edmonds for leading by example and demonstrating that women are a vital

// *Establishing innovative public policies that benefit working women improves the lives of families and communities. We're working toward prosperity for all.* //



component of both local and national politics. The work of the MWPC, she hopes, will foster the next wave of female leaders in Maine.

The MWPC also models how collaboration can be a powerful force in solving local problems. Partnership is a cornerstone of its work; the MWPC actively participates in alliances including the Maine Choice Coalition and the Maine Can Do Better Coalition to move crucial legislation forward. Collaborating with Maine Equal Justice Partners, in the mid-1990s the MWPC helped create the model Parents as Scholars program, which provides better access to educational opportunities for welfare recipients. Over the years, Parents as Scholar has helped hundreds of Maine women improve their economic stability and stay off public assistance by earning college degrees and finding better-paying jobs.

While successes like Parents as Scholars are gratifying, the MWPC staff can't just call it a day once their policies are implemented. Any gains made in social change require continual defense from budget cuts and ideological challenges. "We savor the victories," says Standiford, "but they vanish quickly into the next crisis."

Standiford is justifiably proud of the MWPC's recent accomplishments – the organization has doubled its statewide Action Network in the past two years, helped secure marriage equality for same-sex partners in Maine and successfully advanced protections for family caregivers in the Maine House. But she and her staff will not rest on their laurels just yet. "Systemic change requires constant vigilance," she says. "Our work never really ends."

The cost of that vigilance is paid in part by grants from the Maine Women's Fund. The missions of the two organizations are so closely aligned, Standiford says, that the MWF's involvement is much more than just critical funding: The MWPC regards the MWF as a strategic partner in the fight to improve the lives of women and girls in Maine.

The MWPC has used the most recent MWF grant cycle to focus on the economic status of women working in Maine: increasing wages and wage equality, introducing an effort to broaden access to paid sick days, expanding Maine's Family and Medical Leave coverage, and working to end "maternal profiling," a form of discrimination in which women are denied opportunities for career advancement based on perceptions of their commitments at home. They're making the case that it's time to update policies to meet the needs of today's workforce—one in which three-quarters of women with school-aged children are participating. Maine women can be both good employees and responsible family members. "Establishing innovative public policies that benefit working women improves the lives of families and communities," Standiford says, echoing the Maine Women's Fund's own mission statement. "We're working toward prosperity for all."

As Standiford and her staff of five celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Maine Women's Lobby and look ahead to the 20th anniversary of the Maine Women's Policy Center next year, they envision further gains for women statewide. "Every woman should have equal rights, equal opportunities, and the power to direct her own life," Standiford says. "We want to create a future in which a woman's work is valued as much as a man's, and her choices are acknowledged as legitimate."

What future are you creating? Tell us.

