FROM GAPS TO OPPORTUNITIES 2012:

Revisiting the Needs of Middle School Girls In Greater Worcester, MA

Executive Summary

Completed by

Our vision is to improve the lives of girls in greater Worcester and ensure that local girls grow up to be happy, healthy and productive

Our mission is to improve services for middle school girls in central Massachusetts through research, education, advocacy and collaboration

INTRODUCTION

The Investing in Girls Alliance (IIG) was created in 2007 at the behest of the Mayor's Task Force on Youth at Risk due to concerns about the rise of violence among girls and young women in greater Worcester. With support from the Fred Harris Daniels Foundation and the Women's Initiative of the United Way of Central MA, IIG undertook an initial needs assessment; surveying girls aged 10-14, parents and providers of services and programs to middle school aged girls. The report, entitled *"From Gaps to Opportunities: Meeting the Needs of Girls in the Worcester Area"* set the foundation for strategic planning undertaken by IIG's 30 partners from a broad range of girl serving organizations. They articulated a vision to "improve the lives of girls in greater Worcester and ensure that local girls grow up to be happy, healthy, and productive", and defined the mission to "improve services for middle-school girls in central Massachusetts through research, education, advocacy, and collaboration." Five areas of focus were identified; education, health, relationships, data and information, public education and communication. IIG created workgroups on each area and set to work.

Over this past year IIG completed a follow up needs assessment to measure progress, identify new issues and emerging needs. The same three groups were included; middle school aged girls, their parents, and providers. However the methodology changed between the two assessments, making comparability challenging. In 2007, only girls in IIG programs were surveyed. This time, with assistance from public and private schools in Worcester and surrounding towns, IIG engaged a mix of girls, some who attend Alliance partner programs, and some who don't. This provided important information on gaps and needs, and broadened IIG's reach. The drawback was that the schools involved requested no questions regarding sexual health or behavior and no questions regarding self harm or suicide. As an alternative, focus groups with girls in IIG member programs were held to illicit information from girls on these important areas.

WHAT'S CHANGED BETWEEN 2007 AND 2011?

✳ There are more middle school girls in our community (10% increase) and a big rise in the number of Latina girls (75% increase).

✳ The severe downturn in the economy is a huge change over the past five years. Funding for programs has been cut and families are struggling with high costs and stagnant or lower incomes. The economic environment is an important backdrop to this follow up report.

✳ The rise of technology has been meteoric in the lives of girls over the past five years. The impact of the internet, wireless technology and smart phones is seen throughout

this assessment; from texting, cyber bullying and sexting to internet safety and lack of parental monitoring, the use of technology is an important difference in our girls' lives today. A significant number of girls report spending three hours or more a day on "screen time"; watching television, playing video games, or using the internet for non-school related use. A little less than half report that parents do not supervise their technology use. Parent and providers need to catch up with girls around the use of technology to monitor and guide safe use.

✱ The Act Relative to Bullying in Schools was signed into law on 5/4/10 by Governor Deval Patrick. This new law has impacted both the identification and response to bullying. IIG will need to work collaboratively with schools on implementing effective prevention and intervention resources.

WHAT'S BETTER/WHAT'S WORSE FOR GIRLS?

✱ The 2012 study shows through self report that girls in IIG member programs are doing well. IIG is making a difference in supporting healthy behaviors and setting high expectations for future success. Collaboration on programs such as Girls Circle and AVID have increased the quality and quantity of effective programs for middle school girls in the community.

✱ Girls report low rates of risk behaviors such as substance use (alcohol, illegal drugs, tobacco) compared to their peers in the state and nation.

✱ Girls in greater Worcester have great aspirations; to go to college, to have professional careers and are highly optimistic about their future. However, 60 percent of these girls report they spend an hour or less on homework a day and their MCAS scores are not as high as their reported grades would indicate. (see Table 7 pg. 7)

✱ Girls identify sexual health and romantic relationships as the most important issues for them. Girls indicated that they wanted basic information about sexuality and the chance to talk about romantic relationships. This is a consistent theme from our 2007 report. While most parents were satisfied with the level of sex education their daughters received in school, some parents preferred that sex education take place in the home. Providers tout the effectiveness of the previous local alliance of teen pregnancy prevention programs (Worcester's rate declined 31% from 1999 to 2009). However, many of these resources no longer exist. Local providers are alarmed as they see number of teen pregnancies again on the rise.

✱ About a fifth of the girls surveyed in the Worcester schools reported getting involved in a physical fight; about the same amount reported being bullied.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Girls, Parents and Providers are not on the same page about what is important to them as seen in the table below.

What do you think are the top issues facing middle school girls in Greater Worcester?

	Girls (n=395)	Parents (n=69)	Providers (n=61)
1=most important	Romantic relationships/ Sexual Health	Peer pressure/ peer relationships	Peer pressure/ peer relationships
2	Stress (Mental Health)	Bullying	Family problems/ home pressures
3	Physical body changes (Health)	Romantic relationships/ Sexual Health	Bullying
4	Peer pressure/peer relationships	Physical body changes (Health)	Romantic relationships/ Sexual Health
5	Bullying	Stress (Mental Health)	School/ Education

The following sections of the report follow the priorities set by the girls who took part in the survey. IIG is committed to respecting and responding to what the girls are telling us what they need and what is important to them and letting this drive our work.

KEY FINDINGS; FOCUS AREAS

"We must teach our girls that if they speak their mind, they can create the world they want to see."

Robyn Silverman

∗ **Sexual Health/Romantic Relationships**

In 2007 almost three quarters (73%) of girls identified peer pressure and sex as challenges facing girls. Girls, parents and providers all identified sexual health as a high priority and the girls were unequivocal about their need for more information and frank discussion about their emerging sexuality.
In 2011, girls continue to express a desire for more information about sexual development, health and behavior, in addition to their request for safe places to discuss romantic relationships. Similarly to our last assessment, girls identify this as their top priority, while parents and providers identify peer relationships as their top priority (see Table 1).

Girls report a need for greater access to sexual health education and more information on positive romantic relationships. The rise of technology provides girls with additional resources for information, however this information needs to be monitored for accuracy and appropriateness by adults and then grounded in discussion to ensure real understanding. Overall, in the focus groups with girls in IIG programs, girls reported healthy and appropriate thoughts and feelings regarding romantic relationships, but these are selected girls who are in programs that give them additional support. Greater communication and collaboration across the community (school, home and community based providers) could address this need so clearly articulated by girls.

∗ Mental Health/Stress

In regard to mental health and wellbeing, 60% of the girls surveyed reported that they usually have someone (a counselor, social worker or other trusted adult) they can talk to when they are feeling sad, or 'bummed out'. Another 1/3 say they 'sometimes' do. In the Massachusetts 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 22% of middle school students across the state reported feeling hopeless, and 16% reported engaging in self injury (cutting, burning or otherwise hurting themselves without suicidal intent). 45% of MA middle schoolers reported a need to talk to an adult outside the family for support. The good news here is that girls in greater Worcester do appear to have this outside support, and actively use it. Again, greater collaboration and communication across home, school and community environments will help to improve access to health and mental health support for girls that need it.

"Better to be strong than pretty and useless."

Lillith Saintcrow

∗ Health/Physical Body Changes

In 2007, 74% of the girls said that sports and fitness programs-with options for 'girls only' - should be a priority if new programs are going to be created.

In 2011, overall girls report engaging in healthy behaviors; they engage regularly in physical activity and eat healthy foods and generally seem healthier than in 2007. When asked about their weight; slightly more than half (56%) reported they are at 'the right weight'. 27% report that they are 'slightly' or 'very' overweight. About 5% of all girls surveyed and 15% of those who said they were overweight also reported that they are not physically active at all.

To compare this to hard data collected by the Worcester Public Schools in 2010, see Table 4 to the left. Worcester students, in general have higher

Table 4: 2010 Obesity rates of 7th grade students (male and female) in Worcester and Massachusetts		
	Worcester	Massachusetts
Obese	26%	18%
Overweight	20%	18%
Healthy Weight	53%	62%
Source: Massachusetts Department of Public Health		

rates of obesity in 7th grade than their peers across the state.

∗ Relationships

Almost all of the girls surveyed reported that they felt supported by and that they could be themselves with their friends and boyfriends/girlfriends. They also reported they get meaningful support from adults other than their parents/guardians including those in community based programs.

Parents report they are receiving greater support than they did in 2007, in particular they report getting more support from schools and community based organizations as they raise their girls in greater Worcester.

> *"Middle-school is a training ground for building resiliency for later years. Teasing and bullying do happen and we can't entirely prevent this. Parents can help their girls by talking on a regular basis, allowing time for sorting out problems but most importantly allowing feelings to be heard. This can take time and patience on a parent's part. Having a strong family support system, one where all feelings are valid and listened to can make a world of difference in helping girls 'hold it together' during the day at school."*
>
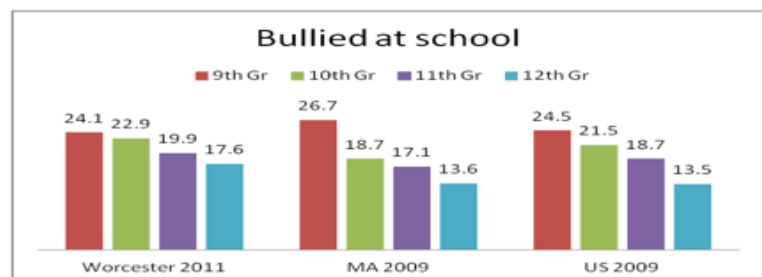> **Meg White, M.A.**
> **Seattle-based psychotherapist**

Girls in focus groups discussed the need for safe spaces to discuss relationships of all kinds; romantic, peer and family.

∗ Violence and Safety

In 2007 51% of girls identified violence and sex as the top two issues that adults should focus on addressing. When discussing violence in more detail, girls from outside Worcester are more concerned with boy/boy violence, whereas girls in Worcester were more concerned about girl/girl violence.

In 2011, violence continues to be a concern for middle school girls; with almost 1/5 (18%) reporting that they missed school because they felt unsafe. Girls in Worcester were more likely to miss school because of safety concerns (20% vs. 8% in surrounding towns). Girls in Worcester were more likely to have been involved in a physical fight as well (22% vs. 13% from the surrounding towns). This data raises concerns about relational aggression (bullying) between girls and the stress this puts on their relationships.

Bullying, now a focus of attention for girls, parents and providers alike, continues to be an area of concern as seen in this chart comparing the Worcester region with the state and nation. While Worcester is quite comparable, the numbers remain high throughout high school, unlike

Bullied at school
■ 9th Gr ■ 10th Gr ■ 11th Gr ■ 12th Gr

	9th Gr	10th Gr	11th Gr	12th Gr
Worcester 2011	24.1	22.9	19.9	17.6
MA 2009	26.7	18.7	17.1	13.6
US 2009	24.5	21.5	18.7	13.5

the drop seen at the state and national levels, showing that bullying behavior is not diminishing at the same rate locally.

Additionally the use of technology or cyber-bullying is a relatively new phenomenon that did not appear in our earlier report. 16% of the girls surveyed said they had been bullied through technology (email, texts, websites). It is also clear that adults, both parents and providers, need greater understanding of the use of technology in aggressive behavior.

* **Education**

In 2007, 71% of the girls we surveyed identified the biggest problem for them was educational demands. They cited concerns over the quantity and level of difficulty of school work, worrying over completing their homework, getting good grades, the transition from middle to high school and how they were going to afford college. 36% also indicated that additional career and life planning programs are needed.

In 2011, we see a growing link in girls' experiences between education and job/career, but many are still not clear about their future aspirations. One concern is the drop in math scores between 5th and 8th grades (87% of 5th graders reported getting As and Bs, this drops to 69% in 8th grade). The amount of time spent on technology for non academic related activity and the inconsistent information about how much time out of school is spent doing homework are also areas of concern if girls are going to be fully prepared to meet their career goals, as Table 7 below illustrates.

Table 7: Comparing Girls' MCAS Scores, WPS Grades and Time Spent on Homework

	5th	6th	7th	8th
Advanced/Proficient MCAS ELA (all 2011 WPS girls)	52.0%	56.0%	66.0%	69.0%
Advanced/Proficent MCAS Math (all 2011 WPS girls)	44.0%	42.0%	35.0%	35.0%
WPS final ELA grade 80% or above (all 2011 WPS girls)	na	na	67.0%	66.0%
WPS final Math grade 80% or above (all 2011 WPS girls)	na	na	68.0%	64.0%
30 minutes or less on homework (IIG survey girls)	43.0%	34.0%	38.0%	28.0%
30-60 minutes on homework (IIG survey girls)	40.0%	48.0%	30.0%	31.0%
Source: MA DESE, WPS				

* **Technology**

This is an area that did not appear in our 2007 needs assessment, indicating a major shift in the environment for middle school girls in greater Worcester. Girls report extended use of

technology. In some ways this use is positive, from collaborating on homework and finding health information to positive social networking. Alternatively, it increases exposure to significant risks, such as bullying behavior through email, text messaging and social network websites such as Facebook. Parents and providers are behind the curve in terms of understanding the amount of time spent by girls in internet/wireless based communication and how to effectively monitor use to ensure safety. In focus groups girls regularly talked about sleeping with their smart phones on their pillows and finding ways around when parents shut down their Facebook pages. One thing is clear, adults need to catch up with girls and actively engage in supporting the positive use of technology given its pervasive presence in girls' lives.

"She seemed glad to see me when I appeared in the kitchen, and by watching her I began to think there was some skill involved in being a girl."   **Harper Lee**

ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES, GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES, SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

SEXUAL HEALTH

Challenges and Gaps
⊙ Girls report that the Sexual Health curriculum in the schools is good, but inconsistent across schools and teachers.
⊙ There is currently no alignment between content taught in school and community environments
⊙ Some parents feel this information should be learned at home
⊙ Girls report need for more information and opportunity to discuss romantic relationships, sexual development and behavior
⊙ Need to engage and hear from some specific groups; recent immigrant groups, LGBTQ, differently abled (developmental delay, disabilities) girls

Remaining Questions
• What are the roles of school based and neighborhood health clinics and faith communities in sexual health education?
• What additional data needs to be gathered to understand the reality of girl's risk behaviors regarding sexual health?
• What exists/what could exist for identified under-engaged populations?

Opportunities
✦ Activate community based programs and align with school based curriculum for in and out of school reinforcement

✦ Explore the role school based and neighborhood health clinics might fill in providing additional sexual health education/opportunities for girls' discussions
✦ Provide parents with effective research based information to use with their girls
✦ Develop collaboration across the community to provide increased access to information and skill development

Strategies
➤ Convene school and community based providers to share existing curriculums and develop greater alignment
➤ Develop and implement a pilot using evidence based sexual health education curriculum for school based and neighborhood health clinics and other community providers
➤ Explore a social norms marketing campaign with the HOPE Coalition ("everyone but you is NOT having sex!")
➤ Provide professional development for youth staff on identified underserved populations (new immigrant/refugees, LGBTQ, differently abled girls)

MENTAL HEALTH/STRESS

Challenges and Gaps
⊙ We don't fully understand all the components girls identified as "stress", although it is clear girls experience stress in their relationships
⊙ Lack of funding for therapeutic support in afterschool programs; we have good capacity in the community with programs that work, but not enough resources to meet the level of need

Remaining Questions
• We need to more fully unpack "what is stress for girls?"
• What additional information on the impact of key transitions along the lifespan; middle school – high school– young adulthood needs to gathered for a fuller understanding?
• What additional data on suicide/self-harming behaviors needs to be gathered?
• What is the impact on programs with diminished resources?

Opportunities
✦ Explore additional resources for funding for girls' mental health support

Strategies
➤ Advocate for focused funding on girls
➤ Develop trend data to tell the story of how stress impacts key transitions in girls growing up
➤ Build, based on data, effective programming to address key issues
➤ Expand therapeutic support in afterschool programs

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Challenges and Gaps

- Best practice programs exist but not the resources to bring them to scale
- Lack of connection to sports/physical activity; including lack of sports teams for girls and lack of noncompetitive, intramural opportunities
- Parent's desire more and more varied sport activities be available to their girls
- Girls' perception of their exercise and nutrition behaviors seems disconnected from the local obesity data
- Families lack information, knowledge and access regarding healthy food
- Strategies for effectively keeping up with latest trends in substance abuse; i.e. use of bath salts and K2
- Need for increased education on media influences on girls' development and body image

Remaining Questions

- Are existing sports programs cost prohibitive to many girls?
- How does culture influence food/nutrition, and body image for girls and families?
- What are our cultural norms around youth use of alcohol and marijuana?
- What additional data on substance use/tobacco use through the transition from middle school to high school is needed?
- How to understand the extent and dosage of prevention activities to ensure adequate inoculation prior to high school?

Opportunities

- Expand connections to healthy food and nutrition resources in the community (taking cultural appropriateness into account)
- Encourage gender specific programming in recreational sports and activities
- Expand access to team sports opportunities for girls
- Utilize upcoming anniversary of Title IX – educate providers, families – are schools in compliance?
- Increase education on media influences on girls development

Strategies

- Develop collaborations to integrate healthy food and nutrition into existing programs
- Integrate and potentially expand prevention (substance use and tobacco use) programming
- Provide training and education on latest trends and best practices for youth staff

RELATIONSHIPS

Challenges and Gaps
- Need for additional adult relationships in girls' lives
- No connection to high risk girls not currently in programming
- Parents need culturally responsive opportunities to discuss parenting middle school aged girls

Remaining Questions
- What additional information on girls romantic relationships, highlighting differences by grade/ geography is needed?

Opportunities
- Explore opportunities for expanding positive adult/girl relationships
- Highlight/educate parents and other adults on the role of technology in girl's relationships

Strategies
- Explore best practices for staff training on how to support positive relationships (i.e. support mapping)
- Implement best practice program with middle school girls to prevent dating violence
- Provide parents with effective user friendly information on girls development of healthy relationships (including prevention of dating violence, use of technology, relational aggression)

VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

Challenges and Gaps
- Parents are out of the loop regarding girls' experiences with violence and safety
- Understanding the level of bullying through technology and how it changes – for example move from texting to tweeting

Remaining Questions
- What additional data about violence in the home is needed?
- What is the data on in school/out of school suspension related to girls and violence?

Opportunities
- Coordinate violence and bullying prevention across home, school and community environments
- Develop a way for parents and providers to learn together the best way to respond to the growing use of technology by girls

Strategies
➤ Increase groups for girls that explore relational aggression (bullying)
➤ Provide more skill building opportunities for preventing bullying
➤ Continue to provide opportunities for parent and providers to learn best practices in prevention regarding violence and bullying in the lives of middle school girls

EDUCATION

Challenges and Gaps
⊙ Parent reported that there are not sufficient opportunities for their daughters; especially in science
⊙ Waitlist for STEM related groups
⊙ Lack of effective career pathway development
⊙ Disconnect between grades, homework, non-school related screen time, and high aspirations for girls

Remaining Questions
• How to have a better understanding of all the resources available in the community? (Who is doing what? Schools, AAUW, Girls, Inc., Girls Scouts, BBBS, College, etc.)

Opportunities
✦ Increase STEM activities in existing programs and build additional opportunities to explore STEM
✦ Explore the development of a Girls School (i.e. Esperenza/Nativity, Consone in Boston)

Strategies
➤ Continue collaboration with Colleges of the Worcester Consortium and expand visits to colleges
➤ Increase access for girls to visit colleges
➤ Expand college internships and job shadows
➤ Continue and sustain efforts in financial literacy education

TECHNOLOGY

Challenges and Gaps
⊙ Parents and providers are not up to speed on technology (girls are way ahead of us)
⊙ Need to educate ourselves on best practices for prevention and intervention of technology related issues (cyber bullying, sexting, early onset of use of technology)

Remaining Questions
• What additional research on technology and its impact on live connection and in the moment communication on girls development is needed?

Opportunities

✦ Develop a way for parents and providers to learn together the best ways to respond to the growing use of technology by girls

Strategies

➤ Research and disseminate best practices

➤ Convene parents and providers on technology related issues

OVERARCHING THEMES

✓ Best practice programs in all areas identified are available or can be made available but access to transportation by girls, staff resources and funding are major barriers to providing or increasing programming

✓ Providers and parents alike need to understand the developmental differences between 5th/6th and 7th/8th girls in developing programs and providing resources

✓ The community needs to explore the entire context of girls' lives, and how these issues; sexual health, mental health/stress, physical health, relationships, violence/safety, education, and technology are integrated throughout girls' developmental experience

✓ Providers and schools need to improve their capacity to provide gender responsive programming across multiple environments that serve girls

✓ Additional training is needed for youth staff in areas such as; LGBTQ youth, differently abled youth and new immigrant and refugee cultures

✓ The community needs to engage immigrant and refugee leaders to access girls we are not currently reaching with information and programming

✓ Providers and schools need to develop and implement strategies to reach girls most at risk not currently engaged in programming

✓ Providers needs to continue to collect and be informed by data

✓ The community needs to preserve effective existing programming

✓ Providers and schools need to explore additional options for best practice programs

✓ Providers need to develop marketing strategies to connect and educate parents (technology, Facebook, community TV, faith communities, town halls)

INVESTING IN GIRLS IDENTIFIED PRIORITIES

We have identified three main action priorities; continue what's working, expand our reach and focus and develop our capacity. These are more fully described below:

Continue:
➤ The Alliance as a learning network
➤ Ongoing data gathering to inform our work
➤ Maintain and expand IIG membership
➤ Stay up to date on issues and trends
➤ Continue infrastructure development – funding resources, access, transportation

Expand:
➤ Our system focus, and strengthen our advocacy
  o Women's Legislative Caucus
  o Governor's Commission on the Status of Women
  o Boston Girls Initiative
➤ Expand and provide coordinated access to resources that exist for parents, girls, providers (i.e. cyber resource guide)

Develop Capacity:
➤ Influence youth worker training to understand gender specific/responsive practice
➤ Better articulate why we focus on girls
➤ Research additional best practices for greater impact and filling gaps in all areas (explore other alliances, not just those focused on girls)
➤ Expand IIG use of social media to reach parents, providers and girls

"The laughter of girls is and ever was among the delightful sounds on the earth!"
Dequincey

RESOURCES

Investing In Girls Alliance of Greater Worcester MA

Contact: investingingirlsalliance@gmail.com   **Website:** http://investingingirls.org

Alliance members include:

AAUW - American Association of University Women	American Red Cross of Central and Western Mass.	Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Central MA	Boys and Girls Club of Worcester
Children's Friend	Clark University	Colleges of the Worcester Consortium	Department of Children and Families
Department of Youth Services	Edward M Kennedy Community Health Center	Edward Street Child Services	Family Health Center of Worcester
Fred Harris Daniels Foundation	Girls Inc. Worcester	Girls Initiative of Greater Boston	Girls Scouts of Central and Western Mass.
H.O.P.E Coalition	Latino Education Institute, Worcester State University	MA Caucus of Women Legislators	MA Commission on the Status of Women
Office of Senator Harriette L. Chandler	Planned Parenthood League of MA	Quinsigamond Community College	United Way of Central MA
Women's Initiative	Worcester Public Schools	Worcester Regional Research Bureau	Worcester Youth Center
Youth Connect	Y.O.U Inc.	YMCA of Central MA	YWCA of Central MA

Other Local/State Resources:

The Girls' Initiative
Black Ministerial Alliance, contact Kalya Hamlett Murray: khamlett@bmaboston.org-
Girls' Initiative Youth Policy Initiative **Report on High Risk Girls and Gender-Specific Programming 2009: http://www.bmaboston.org/node/4#Girls%20Initiative**

Girls LEAP (Lifetime Empowerment & Awareness Program) : http://girlsleap.org/
Self-defense and empowerment programs for Boston girls aged 8-18. Girls' LEAP programs incorporate unique self-reflective and physical self-defense activities to transform the lives of girls by teaching skills that encourage conflict resolution, violence de-escalation and healthy boundary setting.

Consone Academy: http://www.consoneacademy.org
 A planned school for middle school girls with a focus on music slated to open in Boston.

National Organizations

Girls, Inc.: http://www.girlsinc.org/

Girls Scouts of the USA: http://www.girlscouts.org/

YWCA USA : http://www.ywca.org

Speakers:

Rachel Simmons: http://www.rachelsimmons.com/about-rachel/

Jean Kilbourne: http://www.jeankilbourne.com/

Media Resources:

PBS Parents' Guide to Raising Girls:
http://www.pbs.org/parents/raisinggirls/resources/

Political Leadership:

White House Council on Women and Girls:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/cwg/resources

Massachusetts-Caucus-of-Women-Legislators:
http://www.facebook.com/pages/Massachusetts-Caucus-of-Women-Legislators/207394045948652

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women:
 http://www.mass.gov/women/