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# Illinois Council on Women and Girls

Chaired by Illinois Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton

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Annual Report 2024



**JULIANA STRATTON**  
OFFICE OF LT. GOVERNOR

## Letter from the Chair Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton

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The Illinois Council on Women and Girls strives to make Illinois the best state in the nation for women, girls, and nonbinary people. As the nation grapples with an increasingly taut ideological divide, the urgency in our work increases. We have watched our sisters in neighboring states lose their right to bodily autonomy; we have heard the subsequent horror stories of women being forced to suffer rather than receive necessary healthcare. Meanwhile, women employees across the United States are still fighting to be paid the same amount as men,<sup>1</sup> less than 12% of the 15,000 highest performing C-suite roles are held by women,<sup>2</sup> and women entrepreneurs receive up to 40% less funding than their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup> These are just a few of the statistics that help guide the Council's work. Ultimately, we aim to break down barriers while also providing opportunities, tools, and resources to empower women.

I am proud of the work this Council has accomplished over the past year. In March, we established a relationship with the U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau. They spoke to us regarding the gender pay gap and provided information on grants and apprenticeships that strengthen the career pipeline for women. Shortly after, I was asked to participate in one of their events about paid leave, highlighting the huge progress Illinois has made in that area. In September, we successfully launched the second year of the Girls Lead program, a unique mentorship and job shadowing opportunity where girls in grades 5-12 are paired with a woman in a senior leadership role in state government. Looking ahead, we have started important discussions with doctors and advocates regarding a healthcare topic that effects every woman: menopause.

This report also highlights the incredible work our subcommittees have undertaken. Whether we're researching ways to better support victims of financial domestic abuse or making it easier for college-bound girls to find scholarship opportunities, the ideas from our Council never cease to amaze me. I'm particularly excited to welcome a new group of high school students to the Girls Committee in 2025. Hearing from young girls on the issues facing them adds invaluable perspective to our Council.

I want to thank each and every member of the Council who dedicates their time and talent to ensure the future for girls and women in Illinois is bright.

Respectfully,



**Juliana Stratton**  
Illinois Lieutenant Governor  
Chair, Illinois Council on Women and Girls

## Executive Summary

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Pursuant to 20 ILCS 5130/30, this report from the Illinois Council on Women and Girls (the “Council”) describes the creation, membership of the Council, and activities the Council conducted. The progress made on the Council’s policy and advocacy recommendations was provided to the Governor and General Assembly. The Council furnishes this report and its recommendations to improve the lives of women and girls as they relate to the four issue-based committees the Council opted to create, which include: 1) *Gender-Based Violence*, 2) *Health & Healthcare*, 3) *Leadership & Inclusion*, and 4) *Academic & Economic Opportunity*.

### Council Overview and Activities

Sponsored by Senator Jacqueline Collins and Representative Anna Moeller, the Illinois State Legislature established the Illinois Council on Women and Girls Act in 2019. The statute mandates that the Council “advise the Governor and General Assembly on policy issues and initiatives impacting the lives of women and girls in Illinois.” The statute establishes a 32-member Council composed of ex-officio members representing state agencies, as well as individuals appointed by the Governor and the General Assembly.

### Recommendations and Progress

During the Council’s inaugural year, the committees made a total of 14 recommendations: four related to gender-based violence, four related to academic and economic opportunity, three related to leadership and inclusion, and three related to health and healthcare. In 2021, the Council built upon these recommendations to advise the Governor’s Office and General Assembly on ways to advance policies that improve the lives of women and girls throughout Illinois. While advancing issue-based recommendations, the Council formed a Girls Committee in

2021 to represent the voices of Illinois youth in the policy-making process. In 2022, Council highlights included hosting the first “Know Your Rights” webinar, convening with the Girls in the Game organization, and hosting a Council meeting at Chicago Women in Trades. In 2023, the Council launched the “Girls Lead” program, which is a unique job-shadowing and mentorship opportunity for girls in grades 5-12.

### Report Structure

This report restates the recommendations that were published in the 2021 Council on Women and Girls Report and discusses the progress that has been made by the Council in each issue area. It includes an update on our Girls Committee, as well as priorities for each subcommittee going forward.

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## Council Overview and Activities

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Pursuant to the Illinois Council on Women and Girls Act (20 ILCS 5130/15), the goal of the Council is to advise the Governor and the General Assembly on policy issues and initiatives impacting the lives of women and girls in Illinois. This mandate includes, but is not limited to:

- Advancing civic participation of women and girls in Illinois;
- Advocating for programs and policies that work to end the gender pay gap and discrimination in professional and academic opportunities;
- Promoting resources and opportunities for academic and professional growth;
- Improving legal protections and recourse regarding sexual harassment in the workplace;
- Reducing violence against women;
- Improving standards of, and access to, healthcare in general and reproductive healthcare in particular;
- Researching the various points of impact a lack of access to healthcare has on the lives of women and girls;
- Improving protections for transgender individuals, especially protections against violence and harassment;
- Increasing fair and equal access to culturally competent healthcare, housing, employment, and other factors related to the quality of life;
- Disseminating information to, and building of relationships with state agencies and commissions in furtherance of the Council's goals; and
- Increasing attention around the inclusion of women, especially those of color, in decision-making capacities.

### Council Composition

The Illinois Council on Women and Girls is composed of the following 32 members:

- 16 public members appointed by the General Assembly
  - 4 appointed by the House Speaker
  - 4 appointed by the House Minority Leader
  - 4 appointed by the Senate President
  - 4 appointed by the Senate Minority Leader
- 1 representative of the Governor's Office appointed by the Governor
- 4 public members appointed by the Governor
- 11 ex-officio members or their designees
  - Lieutenant Governor
  - Chief of the Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Services, Department of Human Services
  - Director, Executive Director or Superintendent of the following State Agencies:
    - Department on Aging
    - Department of Human Rights
    - Department of Children and Family Services
    - Department of Healthcare and Family Services
    - Department of Public Health
    - Department of Labor
    - State Board of Education
    - Board of Higher Education
    - Community College Board

## Membership

\* Denotes committee chair/co-chairs | \*\* Denotes vacancy to be filled in 2024

Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, Chair	Ex-Officio Member	Theresa Forthofer	Public Member <i>Minority Leader of the House Appointed</i>
Marla Courts	Ex-Officio Member	Ines Kutlesa*	Public Member <i>Minority Leader of the House Appointed</i>
Karina Lopez	Ex-Officio Member	Rhonda Thomas**	Public Member <i>Minority Leader of the House Appointed</i>
Vacant	IBHE, Ex-Officio Member	Kaethe Morris Hoffer	Public Member <i>Speaker of the House Appointed</i>
Jennifer Hebel	Ex-Officio Member	Maaria Mozaffar*	Public Member <i>Speaker of the House Appointed</i>
Jaclyn Matthews*	Ex-Officio Member	Wendy Pollack	Public Member <i>Speaker of the House Appointed</i>
Chris Smith	Ex-Officio	Pamela Althoff**	Public Member <i>Minority Leader of the Senate Appointed</i>
Natasha Allan	Ex-Officio	Sylvia Collins	Public Member <i>President of the Senate Appointed</i>
Sameer Vohra	Ex-Officio	Rochelle Crump	Public Member <i>President of the Senate Appointed</i>
Lizzy Whitehorn	Ex-Officio	Amina Jaffer	Public Member <i>President of the Senate Appointed</i>
Isabella Hurtado	Governor's Office Representative		
Veronica Espina	Public Member <i>Governor Appointed</i>		
Alexa Rice**	Public Member <i>Governor Appointed</i>		
Nikita Richards*	Public Member <i>Governor Appointed</i>		
Kaylyn Ahn*	Public Member <i>Governor Appointed</i>		

## The Creation and Convening of the Illinois Council on Women and Girls

Created by Illinois State Senator Jacqueline Collins and Illinois State Representative Anna Moeller, the Illinois Council on Women and Girls Act was signed into law in 2018. At its inaugural event in 2019, Governor JB Pritzker appointed Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton as the first chair of this Council.

In 2024, the Council held four quarterly meetings, which took place on March 21st, June 4th, September 25th, and December 11th. The Council built upon previous years of work by carrying forward recommendations, continuing key topic conversations, and beginning to plan for future initiatives through its sub-committees. These five issue-based committees are: 1) Gender-Based Violence, 2) Academic & Economic Opportunity, 3) Leadership & Inclusion, 4) Health & Healthcare, and 5) Girls Committee. The committees convened virtually once a month between Council meetings to discuss how to advance their recommendations.

*Illinois Council on Women and Girls meeting in Chicago, September 2024*



## Recommendations and Progress Updates

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### Gender-Based Violence Committee

Sexual and gender-based violence refers to “any act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships,”<sup>4</sup> including acts of domestic violence. The Gender-Based Violence Committee aims to reduce brutality against women, girls, and nonbinary people, while simultaneously building partnerships for better statewide resources for residents who are survivors of gender-based violence.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee continues to work on the following recommendations:

1. Increasing visibility and support networks by implementing public awareness campaigns about gender-based violence and available resources in rural communities. Messaging will be tailored with specifics for veterans, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ communities.
2. Tracking the prevalence of gender-based violence across the state by collaborating with local governments.
3. Ensuring that elementary and secondary school students who are parents, expectant parents, or survivors of gender-based violence can safely stay in school, succeed academically, and complete their education.

#### PROGRESS UPDATE

According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, “Financial abuse is one of the most powerful methods of keeping a survivor trapped in an abusive relationship and deeply diminishes the victim’s ability to stay safe after leaving an abusive partner. Research indicates that financial abuse occurs in 99% of domestic violence cases. Surveys of survivors reflect concerns over their ability to provide financially for themselves and their children as one of the top reasons for staying in an abusive relationship or returning to an abusive partner. As with all forms of abuse, financial abuse occurs across all socio-economic, educational, racial, and ethnic groups.”

To that end, and in line with Lieutenant Governor Stratton’s We Thrive Initiative, the Gender-Based Violence Committee worked to address economic abuse and the need for financial protections for victims of domestic violence in banking/financial institutions, utilizing Ulster Bank in the UK as a preliminary model. As a banking institution that prioritizes community impact, Wintrust Financial Corporation, headquartered in Illinois, showed great enthusiasm in partnering with the Committee and Council to establish financial protections for victims of domestic violence. Planning meetings focused on developing resources, marketing, and establishing trained teams at Wintrust to recognize the signs of abuse and act accordingly to help survivors. Ensuring numerous pathways for victims



to access help depending on the manner of banking, traditional, mobile, online, and digital, will also be prioritized. The Gender-Based Violence Committee hopes that this pilot program will be the first of many, with plans to duplicate it across Wintrust banks, potentially serving as a model for implementation across the country. The Committee also began discussions with the Illinois Division of Banking regarding the development of an education-based webinar with the banking community regarding financial abuse and protections needed for victims and survivors of domestic violence.

## Academic & Economic Opportunity Committee

The Academic & Economic Opportunity Committee focuses on policies and programs that eliminate barriers and build pathways for women to succeed academically, professionally, and economically.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee continues to work on the following recommendations:

1. Empowering young women and girls by creating opportunities to engage with elected officials within their communities.
2. Increasing collaboration with Illinois military bases and affiliated institutions to better serve families living on and around these bases. Existing institutions include the Illinois Educational Opportunities for Military Children Council and the Military Economic Development Committee (which is chaired by the Lieutenant Governor).
3. Increasing access to affordable childcare to allow more women to enter and remain in the workforce.
4. Encouraging women and girls to pursue higher education to increase their wage potential and expanding opportunities for trauma-informed services.

### PROGRESS UPDATE

In October, the Committee hosted a webinar for collegiate women in Illinois in collaboration with Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton's We Thrive Initiative. This discussion, called a "We Chat," provided key insights into the economic concerns and priorities of college students from various institutions, including the University of Illinois in Springfield, Northwestern University, Lincoln Land Community College, and Chicago State University. Students voiced concerns around lack of knowledge around the Free Application for Federal Student Aid ("FAFSA"), student loans, budgeting, and scholarships, as well as the mental toll of being a full-time student while also working to make ends meet.

To address these concerns, the Committee is developing a resource database for college students that will include information regarding scholarships, apprenticeships, and other relevant economic tools.

## Leadership & Inclusion Committee

The Leadership & Inclusion Committee seeks to create pathways for women and girls to access leadership opportunities across a variety of industries.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee continues to work on the following recommendations:

1. Encouraging the involvement of women and girls in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) career pipelines by examining existing and new opportunities for entry. Specifically, opportunities to enter STEAM career pipelines should be focused on access for current and former youth in foster care, youth with disabilities, youth from LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants and refugees, and racially diverse groups.
2. Informing school groups about how engagement in our systems of government can expand opportunities for underrepresented people by utilizing local youth advisory boards led by elected leaders.
3. Improving professional opportunities by encouraging the expansion of internships targeting young women through partnerships between schools, professional associations, high-growth industries, and corporate and institutional boards.

### PROGRESS UPDATE

The Committee is dedicated to providing opportunities for girls throughout Illinois to explore various career paths and envision themselves as leaders.

Throughout the year, we received feedback from girls who participated in the inaugural class of Girls Lead. One particular student expressed a desire to return with her peer research group to interview the Lieutenant Governor as part of a class project. She shared that her experience in Girls Lead inspired her to pursue a career in public service next year in college. This positive feedback prompted us to consider ways to expand the program so that more girls can benefit from similar experiences. To achieve this, we decided to broaden our mentor pool. In the first class, the participants were paired with an



2024 Girls Lead application graphic

Illinois State General Assemblywoman. For the upcoming class, we invited not only Illinois State General Assemblywomen, but also women in senior leadership roles within state government to serve as mentors.

Additionally, we have formed a partnership with the Women's Bar Association of Illinois. They approached the Lieutenant Governor to explore ways to support the Girls Lead program. Through this collaboration, we aim to offer additional experiences, such as resume reviews and spending a day in court to learn about potential legal career pathways.

We are excited to launch the second class of Girls Lead in January and look forward to the coming year.

## Health and Healthcare Committee

The Health & Healthcare Committee recommends health and healthcare access policies for women and girls in Illinois.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee continues to work on the following recommendations:

1. Highlighting healthcare disparities by improving data collection.
2. Supporting communities experiencing gun violence and other forms of violence.
3. Expanding and improving health and healthcare access for women and girls.
4. Expanding access to postpartum healthcare coverage to reduce maternal-care disparities.
5. Increasing access to substance use and mental health services for pregnant and postpartum women to reduce rates of maternal morbidity.

*Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton speaking at the Birth Equity Initiative Bill Signing in Chicago, July 2024*



## PROGRESS UPDATE

This year, HB5142, also known as the Birth Equity Initiative, was signed into law. This bill promotes equity in pregnancy, postpartum care, and newborn care, allowing women to choose birthing options. It mandates private insurers cover services rendered by birth workers, such as doulas and midwives, without consumer cost-sharing. Additionally, it ensures that necessary medical equipment for home births is covered and that mothers have access to home visits from lactation consultants. This bill was a key priority for the Lieutenant Governor and the Council, marking a significant advancement in the protection of women's healthcare in Illinois.

The Health and Healthcare Committee is currently focused on recruiting new members and brainstorming ideas for 2025 and beyond.

Following an insightful presentation by Dr. Pauline Maki and Dr. Heather Prendergast from the University of Illinois Chicago regarding the effects of menopause on women and the existing lack of resources for both women and healthcare professionals, the Committee has decided to initiate a public education campaign on menopause. The first event will be a seminar for healthcare providers across Illinois, offering them a toolkit to effectively assess menopause and its impacts on their patients. The second event will cater to all women in Illinois, aiming to help them understand the effects of menopause and the available options for care. The Committee aims to create essential resources and knowledge about menopause, a medical condition that will affect half of our state's population.



*Dr. Pauline Maki and Dr. Heather Prendergast with Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, September 2024*

## Girls Committee

The Girls Committee is a unique subcommittee of the Council that enables high school-age girls to participate and provide input. Members serve a one-year term, during which they gain valuable leadership experience, engage with key issues affecting women and girls in Illinois, develop personal and professional skills that, and build a network of peers and women leaders across the state. The first Girls Committee in 2021, had nine members. The second Girls Committee, whose term ended in December 2023, had 19 members. This year, our focus has been on reviewing programs, incorporating feedback from the 2023 Girls Committee, and launching a new application process for the 2025 calendar year.

One of our main goals in updating the Girls Committee is to engage young girls who may feel hesitant to apply due to various barriers, such as academic performance, lack of access to extracurricular activities, limited experience completing this type of application, or difficulty envisioning themselves in a leadership role. To reach these girls for the third iteration of the Committee, the application process has been revised. In previous years, girls applied on their own. For the upcoming class, we have amended the selection criteria to specify what we're looking for:

- ***Underrepresented Voices:*** We aim to uplift girls who have not previously had access to similar opportunities.
- ***Emerging Leaders:*** Ideal candidates are girls who have not yet held leadership positions in school clubs, sports, or extracurricular activities and may not have otherwise had access to this type of experience.
- ***Diverse Backgrounds:*** The Council highly values diversity in its membership and seeks nominations from girls with a wide range of geographic, racial, academic, and personal backgrounds. Selection for the Girls Committee will be based on the unique perspectives and life experiences each girl can contribute, rather than their academic or extracurricular achievements.

In addition, instead of requiring the girls to apply themselves, we have asked for an adult in their life to nominate them for the Committee. We hope this increases participation from girls who may not have applied on their own.

We also plan to implement several programmatic suggestions from the 2023 Girls Committee, including adding a parliamentarian position to the Committee leadership. This role will help track and encourage attendance at Girls Committee meetings and other Council events. We will invite the most active Girls Committee members from the previous term to serve a second year, as their leadership and perspective are invaluable. Furthermore, we will restructure the format of the Girls Committee project so that girls will identify, research, and present on an issue affecting girls in Illinois.

Applicants will be notified in December, and accepted girls will begin their term in January 2025.



*Illinois Council on Women and Girls meeting in Chicago, September 2024*

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## Next Steps

The Council will build on its recommendations and continue collaborating organizations, state agencies, the legislative body, and with women and girls across the state to engage in mindful, gender-focused policy and advocacy. As national and statewide issues arise the Council will prioritize the voices of women, girls, and nonbinary residents in Illinois' policymaking process.

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