MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

Part 1: Changing the Future

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Minnesota Women's Press has been sharing the stories of women since 1985, as one of the longest continuously run feminist publications in the country. It is freely available at more than 300 locations.

Our mission: Authentic community-based journalism that amplifies and inspires the stories, action steps, and leadership of powerful, everyday women (cis and trans) and nonbinary people.

Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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MWP TEAM

Publisher/Editor: Mikki Morrissette

Creative Director: Sarah Whiting

Sales & Development: Ashley Findlay, Taylor Roberson

Financial Operations: Fariba Sanikhatam

Marketing: Amber Lynum

Community Engagement: Lisa Huftel

Editorial Board: Katie Dohman, Comfort Dondo, Sarah Gruidl, Nora Hertel, Andrea Pierre, Viktorie Spurná, Ella Stern, Rosie Thale, Priscilla Trinh, Joyce Tofte, Alexis Yeboah

Proofreader: Abbie Phelps

Distribution: Sarah Whiting

Digital Development: Mikki Morrissette

This month's writers: Marian Barcus, Ruby Dohman, Amy Gage, Heather Friedli, Mary Jo Klinker, Brittany Miller, Marlena Myles, Tanáğidaŋ Tó Wíŋ

Cover: Ruby Dohman. See her story on page 7. Photo by Sarah Whiting.

Minnesota Women's Press earned three photography and two writing awards from the Minnesota Newspaper Association for 2024.

Upcoming magazine topics include Our 40 Years (April), Solving Pain Points (May)

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This is Tova, one of the coordinators of our new "Where Do We Go From Here?" conversations in Greater Minnesota.

Thanks to a Press Forward grant, we are talking around the state about the deep issues we face.

Interested in leading a process-to-solutions discussion in your community? Contact community@womenspress.com

COURTESY PHOTO

"Remember that the world is much bigger than this moment, bigger than us and our experience of it, and much bigger than we imagine when we are afraid."

— Mariame Kaba,
Let This Radicalize You

Illuminating Values and Vision

by Mikki Morrissette

We know that we could be giving a better world to the next generation. In these pages every month we learn about women who are creating spaces for greater listening, stronger support, and more collaborative action to help all members of our communities. That is how we enhance public safety and thrive economically.

In short, it is obvious to the Minnesota Women's Press community that we all do better when we all do better. The math works. Examples of that leadership and perspective in this issue:

- **Brittany Miller (Marshall):** As a former high-risk youth, she works with colleagues knowing how improvements can be made for brighter futures.
- **Marian Barcus (Grand Rapids):** After a career in social work, she explains how the economic system divides us by income and why it needs a reset.
- **Minnesota Justice Research Center:** This team is shedding light on inequities in pre-trial bail and evaluating Saint Paul's efforts to prevent gun violence.

Step-by-Step Solutions

Some of the stories this month are part of a three-step process. Rather than drop into a theme and then move on, we are revisiting a particular angle this year: How are Minnesotans creating stronger villages based on values that respect all human beings — despite obstacles and evolving vision about what the right moves are? How are people and resources coming together to establish values and make change so that the next generation can glimpse the potential of Americans to dream bigger (not smaller)?

For example, we introduce this month the story from Mary Jo Klinker about advocates in Winona who are rallying for stronger community support around addressing domestic violence. In May, we'll report on a conversation we will co-host there with therapists, city council members, survivors, advocates, and housing experts. Survivors of abuse currently have to travel an hour away, often with few transportation options and funds, to seek limited domestic violence shelter beds in Rochester and Wisconsin. We will explore alongside as they talk about how to invest in effective solutions.

In September, we'll report on the final phase: Did they agree on action steps?

Thanks to a new Press Forward Minnesota grant, we are finally able to do this type of process-in-action series, with paid local coordinators and the support of our new part-time community engagement director, Lisa Huftel. We also are able to work with partners to spark conversations around the state about immigrant protections and contributions, as well as solutions to the child care crisis.

Thanks to the trust we have with Changemakers Alliance partners, there is so more we can do — not just in telling these stories, but by sharing them widely, and illuminating decision-making processes that lead to solutions.

For that, we continue to need your support. Contribute at womenspress.com/donate and receive an invitation to our 40th anniversary celebration!

MAY 1

MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

40 ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION!

Want to join us at our 40th anniversary? Use this QR code to become a Badass member.

Q&A With Two Minnesota Book Award Nominees: JoJo Bell and Kao Kalia Yang

COURTESY PHOTO

JoJo Bell's *Red Stained: The Life of Hilda Simms*

One of the 2025 Minnesota Book Award nominees for General Nonfiction is JoJo Bell for *Red Stained* (published by Minnesota Historical Society Press), the biography of Black activist actress Hilda Simms of Minneapolis, who became part of the American Negro Theater of Harlem in 1943. We asked Bell what inspired her about the story, and why she has worked to bring Simms out of obscurity.

How were you introduced to Hilda Simms' life?

I first came across Hilda Simms while researching Black history in Minnesota for the African American Interpretive Center of Minnesota (AAICM). I was looking for lesser-known figures whose stories hadn't been fully explored, and Hilda's name appeared a few times on a sparse Wikipedia page and in a couple of old *Star Tribune* articles. The lack of information only made me more curious. Here was a woman who had starred on Broadway, appeared in Hollywood films and television, and performed internationally, yet her story had faded from public memory. I wanted to understand why.

What did you want to convey in telling her story?

Hilda's life is a powerful lens through which we can explore the intersection of race, gender, and activism in mid-20th century America. She was not only a talented actress but also an outspoken advocate for civil rights and racial equity in the arts. She pushed for fair pay and dignified roles for Black actors, even when it came at a cost to her career. Like many artists of her time, she was caught in the Hollywood Red Scare, and FBI surveillance effectively silenced her. I wanted to show how structural barriers shaped her life and career while also honoring her resilience, talent, and commitment to justice — all things she learned as a Minnesota-born Black woman.

What are you working on now?

I'm currently working on uncovering more about Hilda, particularly through the FBI files that were kept on her. Beyond that, I continue my work with AAICM, developing exhibitions and events that highlight Black history in Minnesota. I'm also exploring new research and writing projects that expand on the themes of race, gender, and public memory.

A longer version of this story, including a list of Minnesota Book Award nominees, can be found at womenspress.com/books. Subscribe to *Creativity & Connection* newsletter for more on books, arts, and events at womenspress.com/subscribe

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

The Prolific Output of Kao Kalia Yang

You have three books nominated for Minnesota Book Awards this year. How do you find time to be so prolific?

Last year I came out with five books. The most important truth is that while these books all came out last year, they were written across the span of the last seven years. *The Diamond Explorer*, middle grade fiction, took the longest for me to work through. *Where Rivers Part* was my big pandemic project. At the invitation of my editor, I wrote the draft for *The Rock in My Throat* within an hour.

So while each book has its own story and its own timeline, it is a wonder that they all came at the same time.

Where are you drawing inspiration?

I tend to say "yes" to opportunities to hear, to learn, to gather stories. In the process, I find shiny bits of beauty scattered on life's sidewalks, bits of glitter among the green of grass. Sometimes I'm just following the force of all that is above me, looking on down, allowing myself to be swayed by the changing winds, the trajectory of sun and moon.

I don't need faraway places or fancy settings to find the good stories, the powerful ones that will draw the moisture from my eyes, the heat from my skin. I look for them in the lives around me, in our neighborhoods, our headlines.

I'm continually inspired by the wonder of nature, the ambitions of people, the fierce will to survive, and somehow in all of it, the gift of beauty, of breath. MWP

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Weaving Together an Art Practice

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

submitted by Ruby Dohman

I started knitting at age 8 — I'm 12 now — because I inherited my great-grandma's knitting needles and a skein of rainbow yarn. She never used them, but I sure wanted to, because I wanted to make cute stuffed animals. I quickly learned knitting is not the easiest, especially since I was teaching myself. I came across YouTube videos where people were crocheting stuffed animals. Since I found knitting in a circle impossible at my skill level, and the videos I found online were not very instructive, I thought crocheting might be easier. That's when I started doing amigurumi-style crochet projects.

I still have some of my early projects. They aren't good, but I love them. I used the same stitch for all of them. At first I made tons of tiny snakes because it was easy to practice. Eventually I learned how to make headbands and scrunchies and stuffed leggy frogs.

Fiber arts are kind of like math; once you learn a skill, it doesn't go away, just like addition or subtraction. You keep building on that skill to make other things. And that's what I like about it. I can expand what I can make as I learn.

Last summer, I went to a Pride-focused fiber arts camp at the Textile Center. We spent a week making all kinds of fiber art projects. When I learned how to make stuffed animals, I also learned how to embroider a little and sew a little, because you need to do that to make cute faces and to finish off the projects. They aren't my best skills, but some kids in the camp were great at that and not as comfortable with crocheting or knitting. So we spoke a common language, in a way, and could learn from each other and our instructors.

Fiber arts people are my people. And so are LGBTQ+ people. So the camp was *really* my people. Even though our backgrounds and skills are different, our brains are similar. We all understood each other.

Art is personal. I do a lot of my artwork alone. It's also about identity; we did a lot of identity-based projects together, like making our own version of Nick Cave's Soundsuits. We made dolls that were a representation of our identity. We also dyed fabrics and embroidered them with symbols to express our identity.

At school, we have art class. I like it, but we're there to learn a skill together. We only do that skill with a prescribed color palette, or we don't have access to as many materials, so we achieve similar results. At the camp, we were encouraged to do what made sense to us individually, based on our skills. We could dive deep because we had the luxury of time to spend on it. We had creative freedom in an environment where it was safe and encouraged.

The guideline was: Make this project, but make it different, make it you, make it your own. MWP

First Unitarian Society Presents

A new program for children and youth: become an Ethical Explorer at First Unitarian Society! Dive into ethics through an arts-based lens at the birthplace of congregational humanism. Sundays, 10:30am to 11:30am.

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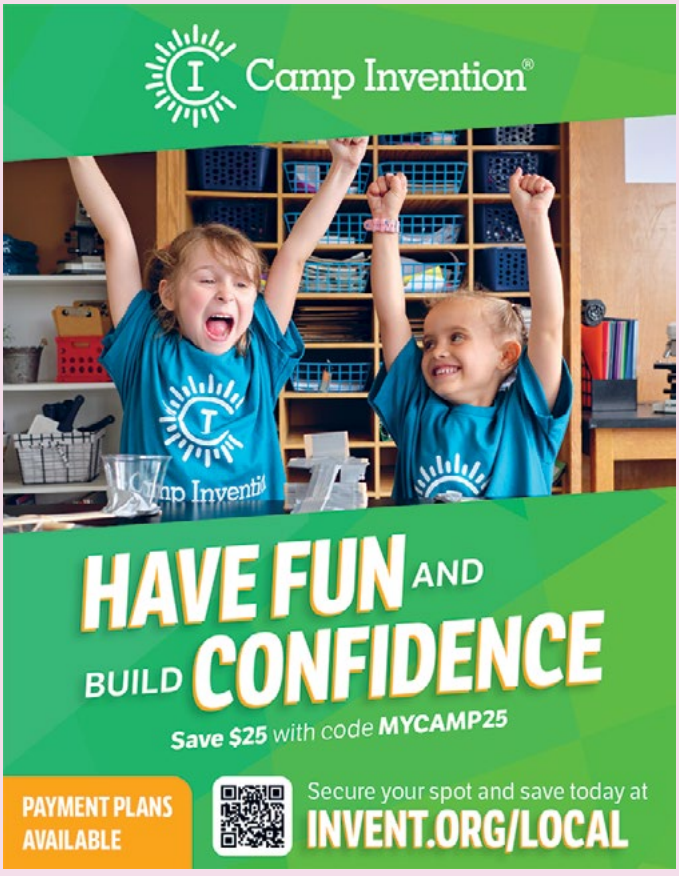

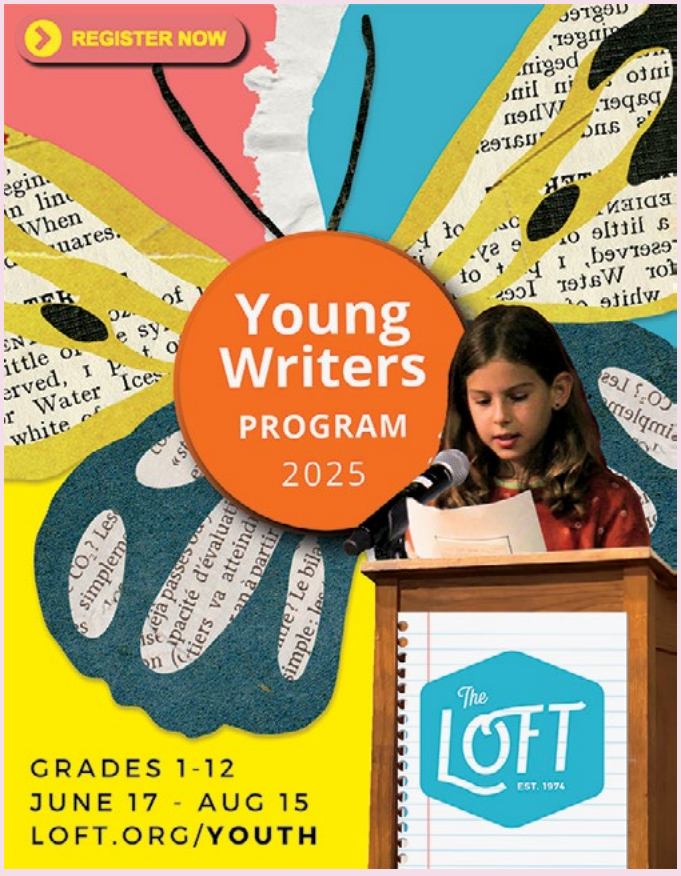

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How We Reduce Harm in Marshall

submitted by Brittany Miller

I spent seven years trying to obtain funding so that WoMen's Rural Advocacy Programs (WRAP), based in Marshall, could create a prevention and harm reduction program for youth. We finally received the funding in March 2024. Funds are scarce in Minnesota to create programs that reduce risky decisions and prevent crimes against rural youth.

Historically, WRAP serves domestic violence victims. We have grown over the past seven years to also support people who have experienced human trafficking, exploitation, and sexual assault, as well as to address the needs of high-risk youth.

Although all youth can make unhealthy choices, some have more odds stacked against them. I was a high-risk kid. Unlike many of my friends, however, I had a good support person: my mom. Many of my friends are living with addiction or in prison, experiencing chaotic lives; a few of them have died from overdoses.

COURTESY PHOTO

What I carried into adulthood is that youth can only achieve their full potential when given resources to reduce the harm that naturally comes in life.

Youth will make undesirable decisions, as I did. We cannot fully prevent youth crime, but we can reduce the risk and harm.

I realized in college that the resources my friends needed when we were young were not available, or we did not know they existed. This is the primary reason my focus today is to support programs in schools. Not only does the visibility in schools reach youth that immediately need services, but it provides information to youth that can encourage their friends to seek help or support.

I have been trained to facilitate the *Not a Number* curriculum by Love 146. I believe in the curriculum so much that I also train others to facilitate. The primary focus is on preventing human trafficking, but the curriculum touches on so much more: dating violence, sexual assault, vulnerabilities, self-esteem, red flags, and safety planning. The five-day curriculum has been welcomed in our communities by health teachers.

We know that many agencies like ours haven't been as welcomed. We recognize that we discuss big topics, but we have had disclosures of violence in every class.

WRAP has presented the curriculum to six schools in our four-county service area. I prefer to connect this curriculum with ninth- and tenth-grade students. In one quarter alone, we presented to 148 students.

I have learned from the students in each class, and I sense their growth. I know they take things away that will protect them. The teachers we partner with have told us they, too, have learned from the curriculum.

Why This Works

My dream for the agency, the youth in our community, and my career has been more successful than people from my youth would have expected from me — including teachers, law enforcement, and family members. I defeated odds that many of my closest friends have not.

I have had this success because of support I have received from my kids, my mom, my family, my coworkers, my boss — who never told me no when I shared my big dreams — and my husband, who has given up everything to make my dream happen.

We need to support kids, rather than shame them. We need to quit telling kids that they should not make risky decisions — because they will. We need, instead, to give them information to reduce harm. The dream is possible. MWP

Are you looking for or part of solutions to work with high-risk youth in your community? We want to hear from you. Contact community@womenspress.com with "Youth" in the subject line.

Why We Need to Improve Safety Through Housing in Winona

submitted by Mary Jo Klinker

I am a rural intergenerational survivor of domestic violence. This means I was raised witnessing domestic violence against my mother and, as an adult, survived again. The cycle repeated.

By age 18, my mother had lived in 14 homes. Housing insecurity and poverty structured her world. As an adult, the need for safe housing for herself and her children bound her to patriarchal control and power. I have childhood memories of waiting in the dark at night for a friend to pick us up — just to stay for a night or two, to flee the violence. Now I realize how strong my mom was in front of me.

The women who took us in would talk into the night, with cigarettes and wine, providing the care and reprieve my mother needed. That kitchen table — and my mother and the women's laughter — was safety.

PHOTO LA VONTE THOMPSON

These are the community-based practices we use as survivors, to protect each other. These lessons of survival and safety drive my passion for housing justice.

The Advocacy Center of Winona (ACW), formerly the Women's Resource Center, is a survivor-driven organization in rural Minnesota, and has been serving Winona County and the surrounding areas for over 45 years. As a feminist educator and survivor, I have worked closely with advocates throughout my life. In the summer of 2020, along with ACW director Crystal Hegge, I hosted a series of workshops with advocates about the history of community-based responses to domestic and sexual violence.

The series began with taking seriously the anti-violence movement's role in institutionalized racism and state violence. In 2020, following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery, domestic and sexual violence coalitions signed "Moment of Truth: Statement of Commitment to Black Lives." It called for accountability and reflection on how white nonprofit leadership within the anti-violence movement had failed BIPOC survivors and movements.

The statement sought to name and address the reliance on policing and the state, and to offer an alternative vision for public safety. It includes survivor-centered recommendations to divest from policing and invest in counseling and health care; to decriminalize forms of survival, like poverty, drug use, and sex work; and to intervene against harm by providing safe housing for everyone. It asked "to increase affordable, quality housing, particularly for adult and youth survivors of violence, and in disenfranchised communities."

The statement is a commitment made by the ACW to support the creation of an alternative response team and to deploy a Housing-First model.

Why Housing Is So Important

As advocates, the people of the ACW see the need for housing first. Housing is increasingly sparse in Winona County. The Winona County 2023 Comprehensive Housing Needs Analysis found that rental prices in rural parts of the county are 3 percent higher than the state of Minnesota as a whole — and in the city of Winona are 13 percent higher. Even with such high rental prices, the study found the vacancy rate was 1.7 percent; the 2023 Winona analysis suggested the rate to maintain rental equilibrium is 5 percent.

This means that victims of domestic violence are left with few options for safe housing for themselves and their children.

We will be in Winona to talk about the challenges and approaches to developing supportive housing in the community. If you want to share your own experience with supportive housing, please contact community@womenspress.com with "Housing" in subject line.

This past year, the Minnesota Department of Public Safety awarded the ACW $283,000 to prioritize housing as a safety practice for victims. Since May 2024, the ACW has used the grant to assist 29 survivors in finding safe and stable housing. Due to limited support from municipal budgets, the ACW holds a master lease on these homes so that survivors have immediate access to discreet, safe housing.

There are other barriers to finding housing for survivors in Winona County. Landlords sometimes view the experiences of survivors as troublesome and do not want them to stay in their homes. Survivors sometimes have poor credit and past evictions because abusers may have damaged properties, leaving the responsibility on the survivor to pay for. Many survivors are victims of economic abuse, leaving them with multiple outstanding bills that the ACW cannot pay.

Safe, secure, affordable housing for larger families is difficult to find. Survivors with pets — important companions for recovery — have a difficult time finding housing or paying pet fees for rentals.

To address challenges within Winona County, ACW executive director Crystal Hegge has led community efforts to address homelessness, such as developing supportive housing and a local housing trust that offers flexible funds for individuals to maintain or find new housing. Prioritizing housing as public safety is a transformative shift in practice.

A Shift in Perspective

Black feminists Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie have argued that "we need to break the equation of policing and public safety" to reclaim public safety. In other words, believing police are the producers of public safety is limited thinking, held by people with community privilege.

According to an extensive 2023 longitudinal study by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the "Domestic Violence Housing First model is more effective than services-as-usual in helping survivors [and their children] achieve housing stability, safety, and improved mental health over two years."

When I tell my mom about the housing-first work that advocates are leading in Winona, she says, "That would have saved my life many times."

The Advocacy Center of Winona's implementation of the Housing First model provides critical insights for Winona County on housing justice in rural communities. Winona County and the city are in discussions to invest in a multimillion-dollar police station — a reversal of the racial justice demands of 2020. Survivor-led visions for reclaiming public safety include housing first. It is time we shift our priorities. MWP

Mary Jo Klinker is professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Winona State University.

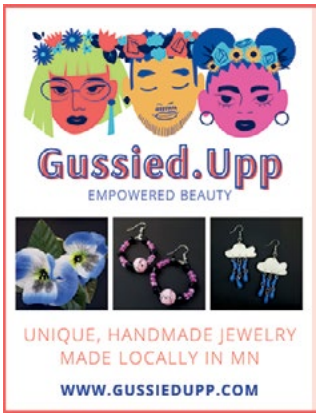

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

A Conversation About Transforming the State's Justice System (Part 1)

reported by
Mikki Morrissette

A few members of the Minnesota Justice Research Center team: (l-r) Anna Hall, Katie Remington Cunningham, Kayla Richards, Jenny DeBower, and Mackenzie Farrington

The Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC) is a nonprofit organization that focuses on how to create a stronger and more impactful criminal legal system in Minnesota, based on community-centered listening sessions, research, data analysis, education, and policy development. Its emphasis is on helping policy makers, legal system players, and community members identify how to improve public safety in restorative, fair-minded, and accountable ways. The team is made up of people with experience ranging from scholars and legal practitioners to students, survivors, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

In this story, we talk with some members of MNJRC about its work exploring the pre-trial bail system and evaluating a gun violence intervention program in Saint Paul.

This is the first in a series of transformative justice stories. Future stories include a discussion with MNJRC's Jenny DeBower about how the Canopy Roots behavioral crisis response team is diverting from the legal system people with mental health and substance use issues.

Pre-Trial Bail System

Says Katie Remington Cunningham, MNJRC research director: "Generally speaking, everything that we do is in response to something — a conversation with the community. The conversations we like to have at the beginning are with community members, people directly impacted by the issues that we are tackling."

After protests erupted in the wake of George Floyd's murder by a police officer, the Minnesota Freedom Fund paid bail for many protestors to get out of jail. Cash bail became a hot-button issue. Why do people who have easier access to funds generally get out of jail, while those who do not remain? Is that a fair system — punishment based on how much money you have?

"People were talking about it," Cunningham says. "But what was missing was a deep understanding of the people who are actually paying bail."

The general perspectives were limited to either: 1) abolish cash bail because it is an unfair money-based system, or 2) oppose a change, because without bail, dangerous people walk free and may not show up for court. The latter viewpoint is held by many despite research showing this is not true.

The reality, Cunningham says, is that the pre-trial system affects more people than simply the person who is jailed. "The people who are paying bail are often women kinfolk of people who are charged with a crime — people who are still presumed innocent," she says.

"We heard from mothers, girlfriends, and grandmothers who were putting up their houses, putting up their cars, to pay bail for their loved ones. Those were voices that were not being heard."

continued on next page

"We are trying to move at the speed of trust."

MNJRC started to investigate the pre-trial system with a grant from the Minneapolis Foundation. After interviewing 58 people, they wrote a report about the wide-reaching consequences of pre-trial bail. A legislator approached MNJRC, saying, "We know it's a problem. What should we do? How do we redesign our pre-trial system? How do we make it better?"

Cunningham says, "We put together this amazing team to answer those questions. The legislature gave us a grant to really dig in and figure out the core issues and best practices."

MNJRC is currently working on the project, which is solutions oriented, in contrast to many research projects that are about identifying the problem.

Anna Hall leads the MNJRC Pre-trial Best Practices team, and also works as a criminal defense attorney at the Legal Rights Center. The team has done 14 community engagement sessions around the state — including the Twin Cities, Bemidji, Rochester, Duluth, Saint Cloud — and is learning about best practice shifts that have already happened around the country. Rural communities experience cash bail, pre-trial detention, and the lack of resources very differently than the metro community, she says.

The team interviewed judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and people involved in pre-trial services from every judicial district in the state about what is working and what is not. They made site visits to Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, and New York to observe pre-trial detention hearings and learn about their revised systems.

In February, the team submitted to the legislature a report of recommendations for an overhaul of Minnesota's pre-trial system. "Everything that the research says is best practice is what the community has already said they need."

The Pre-trial Best Practices project is unique among MNJRC projects, Hall adds, because it is proposing policy or programs, rather than evaluating them, as many other projects do. "We did look at what the system currently does, but we looked more at what it could do."

Saint Paul Project PEACE

Mackenzie Farrington is the MNJRC project manager of the Saint Paul Project PEACE evaluation, which started when relationships with the violence prevention team for the city of Saint Paul — particularly the Office of Neighborhood Safety — reached out last year. They wanted to understand more about what violence prevention might look and feel like, the resources required, and the right questions to be asking. The city also wanted MNJRC to decide how the program should be evaluated, as it was being built and used.

Rather than evaluating with a simplistic approach — does it work or not work? is it good or bad? — the team was brought on board from the start to, essentially, watch it operate in real time and determine what the key pieces of assessing and shifting might be.

Kayla Richards, MNJRC director of community impact, asks the probing questions of clients:

- What is it that you really care about at the end of the day?
- How will you know that you've done your job?
- What will be different or better?

Reducing gun violence was an important goal in the community. A factor that often gets left out in conversations about violence, says Richards, is: How are violence prevention efforts tending to the need for communities to have spaces that feel safe and welcoming? MNJRC was hearing about the need to feel safe in community spaces — such as getting on a bus or playing basketball in the neighborhood.

The Saint Paul team is still hiring people and building a database to track clients. So the current work of MNJRC is

about helping the team understand the key pieces to consider when building an initiative like this.

As the team digs further and Project PEACE's approach changes, research questions have evolved over the span of its first five months. "Mackenzie's team has worked hard to figure out who the community voices are — the folks connected to and affected by the violence prevention work," says Cunningham.

Another essential ingredient to doing effective work, she adds: "Kayla and I have learned over the course of the last few years that, before you sign contracts and connect with partners, we're really clear about the end goal.

"If it's evaluative, if there are things that we uncover, are they ready to hear that and share it with the people who need to know it the most? We don't partner with folks who aren't willing to sign on to that agreement.

"The folks at the city of Saint Paul have been committed to doing good work. If we find they are doing anything wrong, they want to know, and they want others to know and learn from their process."

For Project PEACE, Farrington explains, the city team wants not simply an effective program but an approach to gun violence intervention and prevention that includes wraparound support to the people most involved with gun-related incidents. "Partnerships are really important to them — with the schools, mental health services, local organizations, families, and community. As we're doing our evaluation, we're trying to figure out who those partners are and how to help them build stronger partnerships, especially with the community-based organizations."

The project team will connect more in the future with youth, young adults, and their families. "The key to our evaluation will be understanding how the participants and their families are experiencing the program. We have a strong relationship with the city of Saint Paul and the life coaches who are case managers," says Farrington. "They want us to be able to connect with their program participants. It's just a matter of when and how."

Cunningham recounts the words of Sandra Richardson, an ally of the MNJRC team: "We are trying to move at the speed of trust. Trust is variable. As Mackenzie said, if we're connecting with participants, we are patient and persistent, but we are not simply going in and saying, 'we'd like to interview you.' We want to make sure trust has developed, which takes time and effort and relationships." MWP

Resources: mnjrc.org/pretrial-best-practices

From Grand Rapids: Re-Evaluate Capitalism

written by Marian Barcus

"You can try to fix anything you want. But if the outside environment is not supporting it — if it's actually working against it — then all those little fixes are not going to make it go away. Is our society really structured in a way that supports change for the have-nots, for people who need change? Are we just struggling upstream against this raging torrent? We have this economic system that leads to and creates the have-nots; we can't function without it."

While I did say the words above, quoted in a 2024 Minnesota Women's Press article, I take no credit for the concept and meaning. I am not an economist, but many economists have spoken and written about how, in the words of Tejvan Pettinger, "capitalism can cause inequality, market failure, damage to the environment, short-termism, excess materialism, and boom-and-bust economic cycles."

I'm a social worker, so my business is mopping up the debris of capitalism. Of course, I also have invested my retirement savings in the stock market. Seeing this in print is guilt-inducing; I guess that's the irony of the capitalistic dilemma we're stuck in. But not stuck with, if our society can muster the courage and conviction to change.

PHOTO DAVE BJORK

During my career in social work and mental health, I witnessed people in poverty disenfranchised by the economy from which I was benefiting. I watched people who could not function at an average level of performance — due to physical, mental, and behavioral differences — be kicked aside or chewed and spit out by all but the most compassionately engineered businesses.

I put in 50 hours per week trying to make our economy and social system work.

I agree with Pettinger that the U.S. is not practicing pure capitalism because "government intervenes in many areas of the economy, like business regulation, health care, and education." But the government has not intervened enough, even prior to the current administration, to make a significant and lasting difference in addressing inequities.

We need to find a better balance in rewarding those who excel without exploiting those who do not or cannot. If we don't balance ourselves, I fear our nation will continue to tear apart, a chasm between haves and have-nots that democracy cannot rescue.

Germany's Dr. Wolfgang Merkel wrote in 2014: "Socioeconomic inequality has risen continuously and has transformed directly into political inequality. The lower third of developed societies has retreated silently from political participation; thus its preferences are less represented in parliament and government. ... If these challenges are not met with democratic and economic reforms, democracy may slowly transform into an oligarchy, formally legitimized by general elections."

This sounds frighteningly familiar, as I observe the results of the 2024 presidential election. In 2023, Betsey Piette cited a study titled "Survival of the Richest," by Oxfam International, which reported that in 2020 and 2021, the wealthiest 1 percent of the world's population accumulated nearly two-thirds of all new wealth. In the previous decade, 2010–20, the richest 1 percent had amassed around half of all new wealth.

Piette goes on to make the case that, "Under the economic system of capitalism, to earn money to survive, workers must

sell their labor power to produce goods and services for the bosses who own the means of production. Workers are never compensated for the full value of what they produce; in some industries they are paid only a tiny fraction of it. The difference between the value workers add to a product and the lower wages they are paid becomes the profits that make up most of the billionaires' accumulated wealth."

It's clear to me that capitalism exploits workers. CEOs make millions while their employees earn pennies in comparison. Jobs are not the goal of business — making money is the goal.

Menial labor, and the folks who work it, are being replaced by machines. Industrial and clerical employees are being replaced by computers and technology. Tech workers are being replaced by AI. An investor friend said the stock market is powered by money but driven by greed and fear.

My financial advisor at Edward Jones supplies me with weekly updates on economic performance. Edward Jones and Bloomberg state that average hourly earnings since June 2023 exceeded inflation by 1–1.5 percent. Still, average interest rates on savings accounts are less than 1 percent at most local banks. Mortgage rates claim 7 percent or more, making it nearly impossible for working class families to buy homes and send kids to college.

I'm a capitalist, motivated by making more money, invested in the stock market. I shop and eat at franchises. Capitalism is woven into the way we think, everything we do, most of our beliefs.

Democracy and capitalism are not synonymous, however. Let's separate them in our thinking. Let's start evolving into a different capitalism.

That means we may need to first align our beliefs, or at least mutually agree to put the welfare of the have-nots on par with the haves. What if we set a maximum percentage for CEO compensation compared to employee pay? What if jobs were not a mere side effect of profit, but businesses were valued by the number of employees and the amount they were compensated?

Our country spent a shameful 400 years building national wealth on the backs of slaves. It took a civil war to end slavery, though we never really completed the social transformation of acceptance and equity. Will it take another civil war — a rebellion by exploited workers, people of color, people who are differently gendered, people who are just "different"?

What if our legislators crafted law that truly took the welfare of all of our individuals and our families into account? What if certain basic needs — like nutrition, health care, education, child care — were considered rights? What if they were protected by law, policy, and funding? Not funding based on eligibility criteria, but on inalienable rights. Because without those basic needs being filled, you can forget about the pursuit of liberty and happiness.

We tend to perceive capitalism, socialism, and communism as rigid, impermeable silos. We should apply these concepts to the institutions and situations where they will work the best to build equity. Let's break loose from artificial dogma and do what's humanistic, instead of capitalistic. MWP

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Two Reasons We Need to Pay Attention to Elder Care Statewide

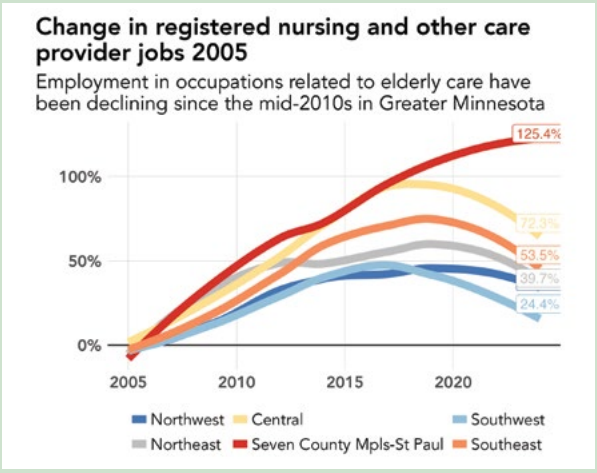
reported by Amy Gage

PHOTO ERIN HUPPERT, LEADINGAGE MINNESOTA

Erin Huppert

Older Minnesotans, especially those in small towns and rural areas, are facing a critical shortage of skilled nursing facilities. According to a report issued by the Mankato-based Center for Rural Policy and Development, the statistics are grim:

- Minnesota overall has 33 percent fewer nursing-home beds than it did in 2005.
- The demand for skilled nursing beds throughout Minnesota will soar by 45 percent before 2045.
- The most severe drop in the number of skilled nursing beds since 2005, at 41.7 percent, has been in "entirely rural" counties — such as Faribault County to the south, Traverse County to the east, and Kittson County in northeast Minnesota. That compares with a nearly 29 percent drop in urban counties.



Source: Center for Rural Policy and Development report from data by Minnesota DEED Occupational Employment and Wages

A conversation hosted in November by the center and the Citizens League — which was reported in a longer story at womenspress.com — focused on the lack of acute-care housing for seniors throughout the state.

"We are an aging state. We're getting older faster, especially in rural Minnesota," says Erin Huppert, vice president of advocacy at LeadingAge Minnesota, a network of organizations that serves older adults.

Arguing for elected leaders to "reframe the state's priorities," she says LeadingAge Minnesota will continue pressing the legislature to mandate wage increases for home-health workers.

The sheer size of the Baby Boom, defined as people born between 1946 and 1964, is at the heart of the issue, says Kim Brenne, interim director of nursing facility rates and policy at the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

"We have a math problem," she explains. "People are living longer than ever. But the workforce we're relying on for care is shrinking. There are probably enough beds, but they're not in the right locations."

The oldest Baby Boomer turned 78 in 2024, and 17 percent of Minnesota's residents are now over age 65, according to Minnesota Compass. In addition, just over half of the state's older adults live in small-town or rural Minnesota, where the shortage of nursing-facility beds is most severe.

Demographic factors are relevant:

- At 53.6 percent, women make up the majority of older Minnesotans, according to Minnesota Compass.

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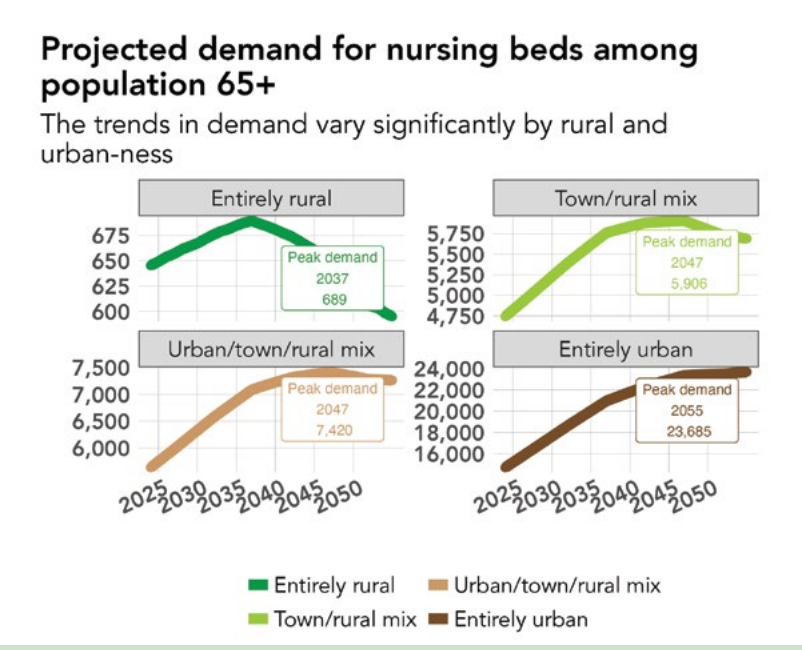

Source: Center for Rural Policy and Development report from data by Minnesota DEED Job Vacancy Survey

Women historically have earned less than men, so retirement can be harder to manage financially.

- More than 9 percent of the state's older residents live in poverty.
- About 28 percent of Minnesotans over age 65 have one or more disabilities.

The average annual cost of nursing-home care is $133,000 per person, said Brenner, who has worked in the field her entire career. Medicare or Medicaid often pays for such care, but reimbursements are slow and rarely cover the full cost.

"Those reimbursement rates are set by the government," says Kathy Messerli, executive director of the Minnesota Home Care Association. A gap between reimbursement rates and actual costs "affects salaries and wages."

Evaluations of Existing Nursing Homes

Out of 340 nursing homes in Minnesota, 148 have "serious deficiencies" uncovered during inspections, and 313 — or 92 percent — have infection-related issues. That is according to the ProPublica Nursing Home Inspect report from November 2024, whose data is now part of Elder Care IQ, a free online tool from the Minnesota-based coalition Elder Voice Advocates.

Launched in November 2022, Elder Care IQ initially drew its data solely from licensed senior care providers — including hospice facilities, hospitals, and boarding homes — from Minnesota Department of Health reports of both substantiated and unsubstantiated investigations. Complaints might include pressure sores and open wounds to more egregious mistreatment such as sexual assault or residents left lying after a fall, says Kristine Sundberg, executive director of Elder Voice Advocates and a former lobbyist and corporate communications specialist. "If we saw issues like this in child care, people would go to jail."

At one 69-bed nursing home, for example, a resident with dementia, chronic kidney disease, and depression suffered spinal fractures after falling from a full-body mechanical lift.

One Minneapolis nursing home has been cited by the Department of Health for six substantiated and 31 unsubstantiated reports since mid-2022.

The Elder Care IQ website details the complaints as well as the health department's investigations and resolutions. "An informed consumer can keep places on their toes and confront the provider," Sundberg explains.

With the addition last December of the ProPublica report, Elder Care IQ now has access to nursing home data drawn from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The tool provides information on fines levied, nursing turnover, nurse-to-patient staffing ratios, and more.

One facility, for example, had a 56.6 percent nurse turnover rate during a single year. That compares with a statewide nurse-turnover average of 44.8 percent.

The Elder Care IQ website indicates it is not attempting to interpret the data, merely report it. Sundberg underscores in an interview: "We take no money from the industry or the state. We are funded by individual donations, and I work for a nominal fee."

Like several other founders of Elder Voice Advocates, Sundberg had a parent who was neglected and mistreated in long-term care. The dead body of her father lay undiscovered for seven days in a senior facility near Saint Cloud.

Sundberg's next goal — in addition to creating an app — is to "expand the analytics" to better influence public policy. Ageism, she says, makes the tool essential. "If we had regard for our elders, this abuse and neglect wouldn't happen." MWP

For our September issue focused on problem-solving, we will assemble a Zoom series of conversations about how to address long-standing caregiving issues in Minnesota. If you want to be part of this discussion, please contact community@womenspress.com with "Caregiving" in the subject line.

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Go to womenspress.com to see the winning stories and images

PHOTO ERIC ERICKSON

Minnesota Women's Press staff members Fariba Sanikhatam (l) and Sarah Whiting

Why Reports of Missing Girls Tend to Be Ignored

At a gathering of trafficking advocates and survivors, a panel discussion focused on the issue of missing Black women and girls that — as with indigenous victims — tend to be misunderstood, underreported, or ignored by law enforcement. Many victims are mislabeled as runaways rather than missing persons. Some dismissal reflects stereotypes and an adultification bias, with the presumption that Black girls are more sexualized and capable of protecting themselves from predators compared to white girls.

Artika Roller, executive director of Cornerstone, noted the importance of taking care of each other. "We know that this current [White House] administration is trying to choke out every program and every resource to do this important work. We have a long four years ahead of us, so we have to stay strong. We have to call on everybody to stand up and make sure that we're heard and that we get the resources that we need."

A sexual assault response team of advocates and others are meeting monthly, creating protocol about how to respond when people are victimized. "Then we can turn to law enforcement to do what they need to do, and courts to do what they need to do, [including to] not buy into the narratives that our young women are [promiscuous]," Roller said. "We need to make sure that we are protecting our children at all costs. We've made a lot of changes in our community, like the Safe Harbor law. We know how to do this work. We've done it before, over and over again."

Find the story at womenspress.com/gender-based-violence-series

Thanks to 2025 underwriters to date, who support Changemakers Alliance content development

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The Four Winds

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

submitted by Marlena Myles, Heather Friedli, and Tanáğidaŋ Tó Wíŋ

Artist Heather Friedli (l) asked her muse Tanáğidaŋ Tó Wíŋ to pose so she could determine how the snow-sculptured likeness was working.

Before it was a park, the Dakóta land at Battle Creek Regional Park in Maplewood was a place where women collected plant medicine, foraged for food, and connected with the Earth and her sacred teachings.

As Dakóta women, deeply rooted in the homeland of Mnisota Makóce, artists Marlena Myles and Tanáğidaŋ Tó Wíŋ were inspired by the stories of indigenous women of this land. They were selected as Minnesota Parks artists in residency, in partnership with Forecast Public Art and Ramsey County Parks and Recreation, to share the beauty of Dakóta culture, history, and art. The goal is to inspire neighbors to reconnect with Grandmother Earth and change our relationships with the park systems.

Saint Paul oil painter Heather Friedli is a descendant of the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians. Together, the three women helped create the Waziya Winter-Wind Celebration festival in January.

Guided by the Four Winds, the seasonal events at Battle Creek will honor the teachings of ancestors. The opening winter event included Myles' illustrations of Dakota winter plant coloring pages, and as well as her augmented reality of Waziya.

Award-winning snow sculptor Friedli created "Heart of Battle Creek" in snow. The sculpture depicted Tanáğidaŋ Tó Wíŋ foraging for sacred plant medicine, with a traditional woven ash basket on her back. Her ribbon skirt swirls around as snowflakes fall into the scene. Long hair flows like the Mississippi River grounding her to the Earth. She pulls up nettles for food and medicinal purposes, getting ready to place them in her basket, which contains sacred sage, prairie coneflower, and a fish. The fish was created by a child at the festival who was inspired while watching the sculpting.

Diane Wilson set the tone for the winter event with an opening essay, followed by teachings on nettle cordage from Fern Renville and traditional snowshoe demonstrations by Dawi Westerman. Guests enjoyed wild tea blends crafted by Flores De Miel Native Tea Company and browsed handmade creations from 20 Native businesses at the craft market.

Future seasonal celebrations at Battle Creek will honor Spring, Summer, and Fall.

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