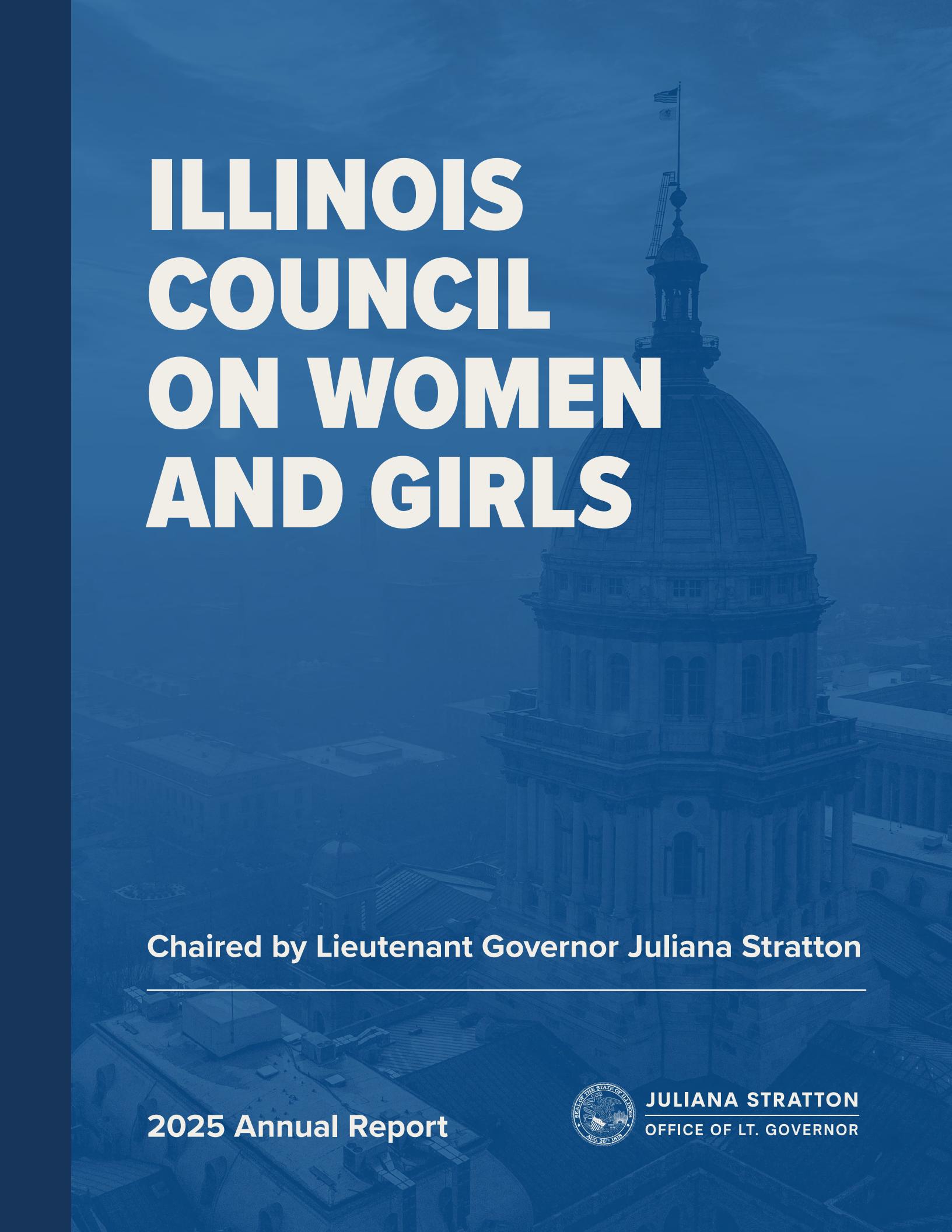


# ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON WOMEN AND GIRLS



**Chaired by Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton**

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**2025 Annual Report**



**JULIANA STRATTON**  
OFFICE OF LT. GOVERNOR

## **Letter from the Chair** *Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton*

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The goal of the Illinois Council on Women and Girls (ICWG) is to make Illinois the single best state in the nation for women and girls to live and thrive.

Much of the progress that women have fought for over the last 100 years is being dismantled, leaving women across the nation in a worse position than the generations before them. Women's healthcare continues to be attacked, understudied and underfunded, the gender wage gap has widened<sup>1</sup> for the second consecutive year, and nearly 1 in 2 women<sup>2</sup> in the United States will face physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime. This is just a portion of facts that drive our work to shatter glass ceilings, create opportunities, and empower women and girls.

This past year, ICWG's Health and Healthcare subcommittee worked to address the systemic barriers women face to access menopause care. They worked with the Illinois General Assembly to pass a resolution declaring October 12-18, 2025, as the Illinois' first Menopause Awareness Week. The subcommittee partnered with University of Illinois Health (UI Health) and Women Employed, to organize events reaching over 1,000 women across the state.

The Girls Lead program kicked off its second cohort for girls in 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade to shadow a woman leader in state government. This mentorship program is another steppingstone to equip young girls with the tools they need to thrive in the workplace of the future. You can't be what you can't see and with the erasure of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs and sensitivity trainings across the country, it is more important than ever for girls to see women in positions of power leading our state.

This report highlights the incredible work of our subcommittees from Menopause Awareness Week to creating resources to help victims of financial abuse and exploitation, the work of this Council continues to inspire me. Having women of all ages and backgrounds on the Council provides invaluable perspective to our work, and I am so thankful to each and every member of the Council who dedicates their time and energy to ensure that Illinois becomes the best state in the country for women and girls.

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 includes the creation, membership, and activities of the Council. The progress made on the Council's policy and advocacy recommendations is provided to the Governor and General Assembly. The Council writes this report and provides its recommendations to improve the lives of women and girls as they relate to the four issue-based committees: **1) Gender-Based Violence, 2) Health and Healthcare, 3) Leadership and Inclusion, and 4) Academic and Economic Opportunity.**

## Council Overview and Activities

The Illinois State Legislature established the Illinois Council on Women and Girls Act in 2019, sponsored by Senator Jacqueline Collins and Representative Anna Moeller. The statute mandates 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 across its four main issues (gender-based violence: 4, academic and economic opportunity: 4, leadership and inclusion: 3, health and healthcare: 3).

In 2021, the Council built upon these recommendations and advised the Governor's Office and General Assembly to advance policies to improve the lives of women and girls

throughout Illinois. While advancing these issue-based recommendations, the Council formed the Girls Committee in 2021 to represent the voices of Illinois youth in the policy-making process. 2022 Council highlights include hosting the first "Know Your Rights" webinar, hearing from the "Girls in the Game", and convening at Chicago Women in Trades for a Council meeting. In 2023, the Council launched the "Girls Lead" program, a unique job shadowing and mentorship opportunity for girls in 5<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade. In 2024, the Birth Equity Initiative was signed into law, which marks a significant advancement in the protection of women's healthcare in Illinois. In 2025, the subcommittees reassessed their goals to reflect current work. These updates are reflected in this report.

## Report Structure

This report restates the recommendations that were published in the 2021 Council on Women and Girls Report and outlines progress made in each issue area, including an update on the Girls Committee, as well as priorities for each subcommittee going forward.

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## Council Overview and Activities

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The goal of the Council, pursuant to the Illinois Council on Women and Girls Act (20 ILCS 5130/30), 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 or co-chair | \*\* 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		
Rachel Bolinger	Ex-Officio Member	Kaethe Morris Hoffer**	Public Member <i>Speaker of the House Appointed</i>
Jennifer Hebel	Ex-Officio Member		
Jaclyn Matthews*	Ex-Officio Member	Maaria Mozaffar*,**	Public Member <i>Speaker of the House Appointed</i>
Chris Smith	Ex-Officio		
Natasha Allan	Ex-Officio	Wendy Pollack**	Public Member <i>Speaker of the House Appointed</i>
Ashley Thoele	Ex-Officio		
Dorian Manion	Ex-Officio	Debbie Meyers-Martin	Public Member <i>Minority Leader of the Senate Appointed</i>
Jane Flanagan	Ex-Officio		
Isabella Hurtado**	Governor's Office Representative	Sylvia Collins*	Public Member <i>President of the Senate Appointed</i>
Gaylon Alcaraz	Public Member <i>Governor Appointed</i>	Rochelle Crump	Public Member <i>President of the Senate Appointed</i>
Nikita Richards Calahan*	Public Member <i>Governor Appointed</i>	Amina Jaffer	Public Member <i>President of the Senate Appointed</i>
Melissa Flores	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 chair.

In 2025, the Council held four hybrid quarterly meetings, on March 11<sup>th</sup>, June 25<sup>th</sup>, September 16<sup>th</sup>, and November 4<sup>th</sup>. Convening both virtually and in person, the Council carried forward recommendations, continued key topic conversations, and began to plan for future initiatives through its subcommittees.

The four subcommittees convened virtually between Council meetings to discuss how to advance their recommendations.

*Group photo from an Illinois Council on Women and Girls meeting in Chicago*



## 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,” including acts of domestic violence. The Gender-Based Violence Committee aims to reduce brutality against women, girls, and non-binary people, while building partnerships for better state-wide resources for residents who are survivors of gender-based violence.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee continues to work on the following four recommendations regarding gender-based violence:

1. Increasing visibility and support networks through public awareness campaigns about gender-based violence and available resources in rural communities with messaging specific to veterans, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ communities.
2. Tracking the prevalence of gender-based violence across the state through collaboration with local governments.
3. Reducing the overall trauma associated with gender-based violence by 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.
4. Increase awareness of financial abuse within cases of gender-based violence and create resources and pathways of financial protections for survivors.

#### 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 was one of the top reasons for staying in or returning to an abusive partner. As with all forms of abuse, financial abuse occurs across all socio-economic, educational, and racial and ethnic groups.”

To that end, and in line with Lieutenant Governor Stratton's *We Thrive Initiative*, the Gender-Based Violence Committee is working to address economic abuse and the need for financial protections for victims of domestic violence within banking and financial institutions. Last year, 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.

In 2025, we continued this partnership with planning meetings focused on developing resources, marketing, and establishing trained teams at Wintrust to recognize the signs of abuse to help survivors. Ensuring numerous pathways for victims to access help is a priority, while making these pathways accessible with easy-to-understand language and clear formatting. The website for the program has been developed and is currently with Wintrust Bank for final development. The Committee is currently working on the training module for Wintrust bankers, as well as establishing a resource hub for employees to reference, ensuring bank employees are equipped to help survivors. The Gender-Based Violence Committee hopes that this pilot program will be the first of many, with plans to duplicate it across Wintrust branches, with a large footprint in the state and beyond—potentially serving as a model for implementation across the country.

*Illinois Council  
on Women and  
Girls meeting  
in Chicago,  
March 2025*



## Academic and Economic Opportunity Committee

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

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee continues to work on the following four recommendations regarding academic and economic opportunity:

1. Empowering girls and young women by creating opportunities to engage with the executive branch on priority issues within their communities.
2. Providing career resources for young women in Illinois to enter the workforce with the confidence they need to succeed.
3. Increasing affordable childcare to allow more women to enter and remain in the workforce, especially women in school.
4. Encouraging girls and women to pursue higher education and increase their wage potential by creating greater opportunities for trauma-informed services for those effected by gender-based violence.

### **PROGRESS UPDATE**

Last year, the Committee began developing a college student database which includes scholarships, apprenticeships, and other resources. It will be a one-stop-shop to make financial planning easier and more accessible for students. After the success of the Girls Lead program, as well as hearing the concerns about career readiness from the members of the Girls Committee, the Committee will be including more career resources in the database, including resume building help, interview prep, and ways to explore new industries. The Academic and Economic Opportunity Committee is excited to continue this work.

## Leadership and Inclusion Committee

The Leadership and Inclusion Committee works to construct avenues for women and girls to access leadership opportunities in all industries.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Encouraging women and girls to join 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 targeted to current and former youth in foster care, youth with disabilities, youth from LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants and refugees, and racially diverse groups;
2. Expand opportunities for underrepresented people through local youth advisory boards led by elected leaders; and
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 committed to providing opportunities for girls throughout Illinois to experience different career pipelines and to see themselves as leaders.

The second year of the Girls Lead program was expanded to include women in any leadership position in state government, including elected General Assemblywomen, chiefs of staff, agency directors, general counsels, and more. This year, the program had 84 participants from about 30 counties in Illinois. These girls, who ranged in age from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, shadowed 74 mentors. Girls from across the state observed various offices and learned about the expansive roles that exist within state government. The participants then wrote reflections on their experiences:

#### Girls Lead Participant Quotes

“Now, the Girls Lead Program made me learn so much that I feel I can change the world if I become a leader. I could make the world a better place and to make everyone feel their opinions matter no less than others.”

**Kio Roy**

*7<sup>th</sup> grade, Peoria County*



2024-2025 Girls Lead participants with Lieutenant Governor Stratton, June 2025

“Before my shadow days, I was not as aware of the people behind the scenes in politics and government such as community engagement directors or the people in the State Capitol such as a clerk. My experiences have opened my eyes to a plethora of jobs in both the private and public sector.”

**Kalani Hankerson-Todd**

*9<sup>th</sup> grade, Will County*

“Getting to be part of the Girls Leadership Program helped me become more confident in my leadership skills, have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a leader, and know the importance of leading by example.”

**Claudia Berek**

*6<sup>th</sup> grade, Sycamore County*

Beyond the shadow days, Girls Lead participants had the opportunity to attend a series of supplementary development programming, which included sessions with Illinois Supreme Court Justice Mary Kay O’Brien, Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski, Chicago City Clerk Anna Valencia, and the Lieutenant Governor. We also hosted college financial aid readiness webinars and mental health mindfulness sessions.

The Committee is proud of the incredible dedication of our Girls Lead participants and mentors from the 2024–2025 program year and is looking forward to the 2025–2026 cohort. Applications opened for the new cohort in November, and the shadowing will begin in Spring of 2026. The Leadership and Inclusion Committee is thrilled to continue expanding opportunities for girls in the State of Illinois.

## Health and Healthcare Committee

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

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Highlighting healthcare disparities by improving data collection.
2. Supporting communities experiencing gun violence and other forms for 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.

### PROGRESS UPDATE

The Health and Healthcare Committee focuses on awareness of menopause and access to treatment in Illinois. During the 2025 legislative session, the Council worked to pass a resolution declaring October 12–18, 2025, as the first Illinois Menopause Awareness Week. The Health and Healthcare Committee worked with the Council at large, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, Women Employed, and UI Health to host a series of events and conversations throughout the week with experts in the field of Menopause about symptom management, treatment options, and economic impacts.



Menopause Awareness Week panel at UI College of Medicine Peoria, October 2025



*Menopause Matter panelists at Hire360 (left to right: Dr. Pauline Maki [UI Health], Dr. Makeba Williams [UI Health], Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, Cherita Ellens [Women Employed], Annette Payot, MSN, CNM [PCC Community Wellness Center]), October 2025*

Throughout the course of the week, the team put on three in-person events and three webinars across the state, including:

- A kick-off event at Trinity United Church of Christ;
- A panel discussion at Hire360; and
- A medicine-focused fireside chat at the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria.

The webinars focused on introducing menopause to a wide range of audiences, including:

- UIC Health on Menopause 101;
- Women Employed on the economic impact of menopause; and
- Exercise, sleep, and nutrition during menopause.

The Health and Healthcare Committee is now focused on supporting the passage of meaningful legislation related to menopause in Illinois.

## Girls Committee

The Girls Committee is a unique subcommittee of the Council that allows the input and participation of high school girls. Members serve a one-year term where they gain valuable experience in leadership, engage with key issues affecting women and girls in Illinois, develop skills that benefit their personal and professional growth, and build a network of peers and women leaders across the state. Our first Girls Committee in 2021–2022 had nine members. Our second Girls Committee, whose term ended in December 2023, had 19 members. Our attention last year concentrated around program review, incorporating the feedback of the 2023 Girls Committee for the 2025 Girls Committee, which had 25 members this year.

One of the main goals in implementing programmatic updates to the Girls Committee was to engage young girls who may not feel comfortable applying to the program due to various barriers, including grades, lack of access to extracurricular activities, or seeing themselves in a leadership position. This year, we adjusted the application process for girls to be nominated by an adult in their life; such as a teacher, coach, or counselor. This year, we had 25 girls on the Committee.

In 2025, the members of the Girls Committee met virtually to hear from policy experts, learn research techniques from librarians, and discuss policy issues affecting Illinois. The group decided on three policy areas to research and propose solutions to, this included access to safe healthcare

*Lieutenant Governor Stratton with 2025 Girls Committee members*



services for women, safety on public transit, and access to career and academic resources for high school students. The group gave three policy presentations on these issues to the Council during the Q4 meeting. The proposals were met with strong interest from Council members, and many of the Council members have expressed interest in connecting with the girls to continue working on these issues together.

The Council is proud of the hard work and dedication of the 2025 Girls Committee. The Council will welcome a new cohort of the Girls Committee in 2026, and after the success of the nomination format, we will be continuing on with this method for next year's application.

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## Next Steps

The Council will build on its recommendations and continue to partner with women and girls across the state to work alongside organizations, state agencies, and the legislative body to engage in mindful gender-focused policy and advocacy. As the landscape changes at the national and statewide levels, the Council will continue to center the voices of women, girls, and non-binary residents in Illinois' policymaking.

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1. National Network to End Domestic Violence. (2025, May). *Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Fact Sheet*. <https://nnedv.org/wp-content/documents/DVSA%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20May%202025%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
2. Wingfield, A. H. (2025, October 29). The Gender Wage Gap Is Widening Again—Can Our Policies Explain Why? *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adiaharveywingfield/2025/10/29/the-gender-wage-gap-is-widening-again-can-our-policies-explain-why>