

# Rose Mary Meyer, BVM:

## *17 Years of Building Bridges and Trust*

by Mary Fran McLaughlin, BVM



**Completing 17 years (2002–2019) as** director of Project IRENE (Illinois Religious Engaging in Nonviolent Endeavors), Rose Mary (Sebastian) Meyer, BVM has worked tirelessly with others to assure the passage of justice-oriented legislation in the Illinois House and Senate.

Some of these bills involved issues of human trafficking, immigration support and protection, increases in childcare, mental health, and domestic violence services, lowering interest on payday loans, ending the death penalty in Illinois, earned paid sick leave, salary equity, and many more.

Project IRENE is a collective voice seeking justice for women and children through systemic change in Illinois. As Rose Mary transitions into “retirement,” she is grateful to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Region VIII, that has supported this endeavor since 1996. Her Rolodex is expansive and includes

those involved in each step of the legislative process: grassroots individuals and organizations that supported or opposed proposed legislation, legislative assistants, lawyers, legislators, and the governor.

Using her networking and diplomatic skills to build bridges, she grew relationships where “questions are honored, expertise is shared, experience is treasured, trust is built, and facts are used to counter any false information that has surfaced,” Rose Mary says.

Studying research, scheduling and attending meetings, making phone calls, participating in teleconferencing, and checking emails were time-consuming but necessary to keep issues and pending legislation moving forward.

Each year monitoring and scrutinizing the proposed state budget was essential and brought attention to increased needs for childcare, early childhood education, immigrant services, colleges and

universities, mental health support, domestic violence services, etc. Unfortunately, in some years, these items not only were deeply cut but eliminated from the funding. For some Illinois residents, this caused great suffering.

Rose Mary believes that rallies at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield were helpful in getting attention from a wider audience for impending legislation.

Legislators who supported the bill were speakers, as were individuals who were impacted by the bill. These witnesses who shared their challenges were especially effective in touching hearts and changing minds.

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—Rose Mary Meyer



### Legislative Victories

Legislation to protect women who have been trafficked is one of Rose Mary’s proudest accomplishments during her time with Project IRENE.

“I am forever grateful for meeting regularly with a group of women who had been trafficked, as well as with other advocates working at the Capitol regarding justice issues. We advocates listened to the women who had been trafficked. After much listening, we worked to pass a bill, one each year, that was essential for their well-being,” Rose Mary says.

“Some of these women went to the Capitol to testify during committee hearings on behalf of those currently



Rose Mary (Sebastian) Meyer, BVM (third from l.) gathers with other advocates, including BVM Mary Ellen (Davidette) Meckley (third from r.) at an immigration rally in 2019.

being trafficked and those who were survivors of trafficking. Their testimony was deeply moving and convinced numerous legislators to vote yes on trafficking bills,” Rose Mary continues.

“We legislative advocates also did much education as we talked with individual legislators to obtain their ‘yes’ votes on the bills”

Elimination of the death penalty is another advocacy issue Rose Mary will never forget.

“Legislators from a variety of geographic areas in Illinois had experienced the murder of a family member. The decision to vote for or against the death penalty bill was a deeply personal decision,” she says. “I also had the

privilege of accompanying some women who came to Springfield to advocate for the bill because they too had experienced murder in their families. Their strength and courage I shall never forget.”

### From Teaching to Advocating

Previous to Rose Mary’s time with Project IRENE, she spent her early years as a BVM in education in elementary and secondary schools; served at 8th Day Center for Justice in Chicago; participated in establishing parish social ministry programs in several Chicago parishes; led the BVM Women’s Office; joined the Call to Action staff; and was one of the founders and executive director of the now-closed Peace

Museum in Chicago and its participation with “Arts in the Park.”

Although Rose Mary is not making any plans at this time, she is looking forward to a more relaxed schedule with time to catch up on reading.

No doubt we will continue to enjoy her updates on important state and national legislation, receive her resourceful advice on social issues, and meet her at rallies!

Blessings, Rose Mary!

**About the author:** Mary Fran (Virginia Mary) McLaughlin, BVM is enjoying retirement in Chicago and is a board member at Christ the King Jesuit College Prep, a Cristo Rey School in the Austin neighborhood.