

## SUNDERLAND

# Resident garners heroine award

By **MARY BYRNE**  
Staff Writer

SUNDERLAND — A Sunderland woman has been named one of this year's Commonwealth Heroines.

Aleks Kajstura, 37, was one of 133 women across the state to receive recognition from the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, a state group that serves to advance women and girls toward equity in all areas of life.

"It was such a great honor, but definitely surprising to see my name among all these women doing wonderful work for the commonwealth," said Kajstura, who has lived in Sunderland since 2008.

Kajstura was nominated by state Rep. Natalie Blais — also of Sunderland — who first met Kajstura in 2015 when they served on the hiring committee for the Sunderland town administrator position.

"I remember being impressed by her professionalism, her thoughtfulness and her commitment to a fair process," Blais said.

More recently, Blais said, she discovered the work Kajstura does for the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit that researches the negative impacts of mass incarceration on society as a whole.

Kajstura serves as the legal director of the organization, where she lead the campaign against prison gerrymandering and has highlighted the ways in which women are treated differently than men in the criminal justice system.

"She is a real champion, not only for her community, but also for people who are too often ignored," Blais said. "It made her an excellent



**KAJSTURA**

choice for the Commonwealth Heroine award."

In addition to work she does at the national level, Kajstura, who was born in Krakow, Poland before immigrating to the United States in 1992, has served for 10 years as a member of the Sunderland Finance Committee. She also volunteers with the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts and is a member of Pioneer Valley Multisport.

Though no in-person ceremony can be held — as would have been the case in previous years — a virtual recognition via Facebook was held on June 24, and Blais expects to present her with a certificate later this month.

"Typically we're in the State House, gathering together all of the Commonwealth Heroines, and it's an amazing ceremony that really focuses on the accomplishments of so many women across the commonwealth," Blais said. "It's sad not to be there in person."

*Mary Byrne can be reached at [mbyrne@recorder.com](mailto:mbyrne@recorder.com) or 413-772-0261, ext. 263. Twitter: @MaryEByrne*