

Kennedy: Pandemic exacerbated pay disparity in workforce

By Marlene Kennedy | February 1, 2023

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARLENE KENNEDY



At a hearing this week in Albany to take testimony on the COVID pandemic's impact on the wage gap between male and female New Yorkers, the head of the WNY Women's Foundation told the story of Patty, a single mother of two in East Buffalo.

On a typical morning, Patty bundles one child off to school, awaits her mother's arrival to care for the baby, then needs two bus transfers to get to her job as a direct-care worker at a nursing home, where earnings must be supplemented with food stamps.

Her story is not unique, said Sheri Scavone, CEO of the foundation, a nonprofit that advocates for policies to support working women, since one of every two female-headed households in the Buffalo area with children lives in poverty.

"We survived in the pandemic on the backs of women like Patty, who showed up every day to make \$15.14 – or less – an hour as a direct-care worker," she said.

The story put a face on the data presented by others, both in Albany and last week in New York City, assessing whether the pandemic, which shut down great swaths of the economy in its early days, exacerbated the already-existing gender wage gap.

The testimony is due to become part of an update to a 2018 wage-gap report prepared by a group that Gov. Kathy Hochul co-chaired as lieutenant governor with the



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state's labor commissioner, Roberta Reardon. Reardon is spearheading the update, which Hochul ordered last summer.

Reardon opened both hearings by noting the pay gap has been an issue “for generations” – in the 1960s, women earned 60 cents to every \$1 earned by a man. Although it's closer to 90 cents to the dollar now in New York, ahead of every other state, the gap remains wide for

women of color.

“But when the pandemic struck, it was like pouring gasoline on a fire that we have worked so hard to collectively put out,” she said.

Speakers offered statistics to her call to see “just how deep the wound is” from COVID.

Lina Moe, assistant director for economic research at the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School, indicated the state has 267,000 fewer jobs now than before the pandemic, with many of the losses coming in face-to-face sectors (leisure, hospitality, retail) where female workers tend to dominate.

She suggested proposed legislation to raise the state minimum wage and then index it to both the cost of living and increases in labor productivity – which is gaining momentum but has detractors – would prove especially beneficial to women, since they hold more minimum-wage jobs than men.

Others talked up the potential benefits to eliminating the lower tipped wage found in hospitality jobs and committing to universal child care.

For Reardon, the wage gap is not a one-dimensional issue: “Pay equity is good for women, for families, for businesses, for the entire economy.”

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