

THE BUFFALO NEWS



Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand addresses the National Association of Commissions for Women Conference in Buffalo. Pay equity was among the key topics of discussion.

Women in Erie County earn less than men regardless of education

By Sandra Tan (http://buffalonews.com/author/sandra_tan/) | Published August 1, 2017 | Updated August 2, 2017

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If you're a woman with a college degree in Erie County, chances are you are making a fourth to a third less than a man of the same educational level. On average, you're making more than \$16,000 less.

That's if you went to college. If you didn't, you could be earning up to 40 percent less than a man.

For full-time employees who work year round, regardless of educational background, the median pay for women in Erie County is \$40,610, \$10,356 less than the median pay earned by a man. For women of color, the gap is even greater.

Those are the facts based on American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census. And while the gender pay gap is a nothing new locally or nationally, the recent national conference in Buffalo on the Commissions for Women brought that home.

Now, Buffalo wants to join cities like Boston and Seattle, which have found innovative new ways to empower women and gain buy-in from businesses. By early next year, the Western New York Women's Foundation hopes to announce its own program, called "All In," that would narrow the wage gap and raise more women to leadership positions.

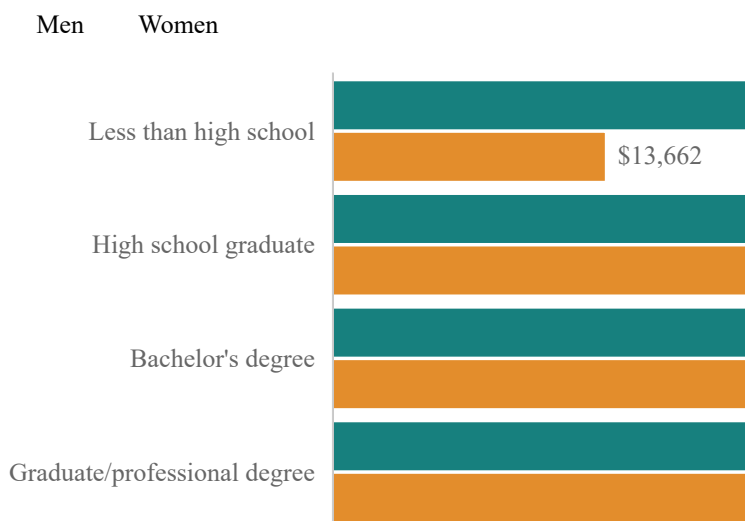
"We're on it," responded Sheri L. Scavone, executive director of the Women's Foundation. "This is a thoughtful, long-term project. We will launch it when we know it can be successful. The whole intent is to make Buffalo a better place for women to live, grow and work."

Evelyn Murphy, former lieutenant governor of Massachusetts and executive director of The Wage Project, said addressing such a complex problem requires buy-in from businesses and more negotiating tools for women, not just government legislation.

"We will all die before we get rid of this wage gap, unless we do something about it," she said. "There are no simple answers, but there are answers out there."

Confronting the gender wage gap in Erie County

Erie County follows national wage gap trends when it comes to gender pay equity trends for adults age 25 and older. The median income for women in Erie County is consistently less than that for men with similar education.



THE BUFFALO NEWS » SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2011-2015 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY FIVE-YEAR ESTIMATES

DATA

Murphy spoke with The Buffalo News before giving her keynote address at the Hyatt Regency. The women's conference, held for the first time in Buffalo, brought national experts to speak on the issue of a wage gap that has persisted nearly 55 years after President Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act into law.



(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/bncore/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/evelyn-murphy.jpg>)

Former Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Evelyn Murphy spoke at the women's conference in Buffalo about the strides made in Boston to achieve gender pay equality.

Conference speakers noted that while 100 years have passed since women New Yorkers earned the right to vote, legal efforts to promote equal pay for women have seen limited success.

Local gender equity advocates appeared last month at City Hall to give testimony to a state pay equity co-chaired by Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul.

"Women's work is devalued because women do it," testified Scavone.

Pay equity not an easy problem to solve because so many factors play a role, starting with social conditioning in childhood. According to the

National Committee on Pay Equity and other sources, these rank among the top reasons the pay gap persists:

- Wage data is kept secret, making it almost impossible for women and minorities to know how much they're getting paid compared with white male colleagues of similar background and job duties. When negotiating a salary, women may undervalue themselves because they don't know what a job really pays.
- Suing for equal pay under the Equal Pay Act is costly and impractical for most working women.
- Women often take time out of the work force as primary caregivers for children and other ill family members, putting them behind on earnings when they return. The lack of paid family leave and affordable, quality child care exacerbates this situation. Because women typically get paid less than a male spouse, it's easier to justify their loss of income than a man's.
- In many cases, occupations held predominantly by women are valued less, and paid less, than occupations held predominantly by men.
- Subtle forms of discrimination persist, such as steering assignments of greater authority and promise toward men. The "old boys network" also keeps women from building the kinds of work relationships they need to advance.

The first barrier – wage transparency – is one that pay equity advocates are targeting both through legislation and through a new effort by The Wage Project in Boston.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand continues to push a federal bill that would require companies to be more transparent regarding what salaries they pay their employees so that women can negotiate better salaries for themselves. It also prohibits someone from being disciplined for asking about other people's salaries.

"All we can do is incentivize transparency and create requirements that you can't punish someone for at least trying to get to the bottom of, are they paid fairly?" Gillibrand said last week.

Companies worry that such transparency would open them up to lawsuit city, despite more limited pay transparency measures that have been adopted at various state and federal government levels. Attempts to legislate and regulate pay equity have been unsuccessful in eliminating the gender pay gap.

But cities like Boston have found a way to gain voluntary compliance with the biggest private employers in the city by using computer programs that promise participating businesses anonymity regarding their payroll data.

Murphy also helped jump-start training programs, now being rolled out nationwide, to teach female college students and working women how to negotiate fair salaries that don't sell themselves short. Tens of thousands of women have gone through this training, she said.

Murphy said the model that exists in Boston could be replicated by government-sponsored women's commissions across the country.

"If all those commissions would pick this up and do it, the potential for the country to affect the wage gap is profound," Murphy said.

The Western New York Women's Foundation has been in communication with Boston and other cities to develop its own local program that targets not only pay equity but broader goals of lifting women into positions of leadership, where policy decisions are made.

The goal of the All In program, still in development, is to work with individual women, businesses, community organizations and government to reduce barriers to advancement and equal pay, Scavone said. That includes voluntary efforts by employers and more training workshops for young women joining the workforce and career women already in the workforce.

"This is a huge, ambitious program, and the key is getting business to the table," said Karen King, head of Erie County's Commission on the Status of Women.

She added that broader collaboration will be the key to seeing real change in pay equality across the region and the state. Though local women's commissions strive to do their part, she said, statewide leadership, communication and coordination would make a much bigger difference.

Finally, pay equity advocates point out that women wouldn't be the only ones who benefit from more women-friendly and family-friendly workplace changes. They would also benefit businesses would also be able to recruit and retain talented female employees. Meanwhile, fewer female-headed

families would struggle in poverty, remain dependent on public benefits and services, and suffer from poor health.

"If women were paid a dollar for a dollar, we'd create this huge economic engine," Gillibrand said. "Much more money would flow into the economy."

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