Pay Not Equal in Oregon: Civil Rights Report

State labor agency says pay gap hurts whole state, not just women and people of color

The pay gap between women, people of color and their male counterparts negatively impacts short-term earnings, long-term savings, housing security, health care and educational opportunities, a new report from the Oregon Council on Civil Rights finds.

The Council's report to Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian looks at contributing factors and policy recommendations to achieve equal pay for equal work. The Council will present findings to the Oregon Legislature as a result of Oregon SB 744 (2013), authored and sponsored by Sen. Chris Edwards (D-Eugene).

"Oregon's wage gap doesn't just hurt women and people of color, it hurts everyone," said Sunny Petit, chair of the Oregon Council on Civil Rights. "Our workforce is changing – with women serving as the breadwinners or co-breadwinners for nearly two-thirds of families across the country. This report highlights new tools and recommendations for policymakers so that we can end the pay gap and put Oregon families on stable economic footing."

In Oregon, women fare only slightly better than the national average, earning 79 cents for every dollar that male workers earn in the state. The disparity among women of color is wider still: Hispanic and Latina women working full time earned only 59 percent of the income of their white male counterparts.

"There's no one, overarching driver of the pay gap," Avakian says. "And no single policy recommendation alone will eliminate the disparity. What it will take is focused, ongoing attention – and commitment to building a stronger, more equitable economy. Oregon does not have to accept economic insecurity and inequality – nor should we wait for Congress to act."

Avakian says he will use the recommendations to inform the agency's development of an action plan to end Oregon's wage gap.

"It's wrong that equally qualified women and men with similar life experiences bring home very different paychecks for the same work," said Sen. Edwards. "When we close the pay gap – and strengthen the buying power of millions of Oregonians – that benefits families, communities, and our economy as a whole."

The report shows that in many of the top paying fields in Oregon – such as engineering, computer and mathematics, and law enforcement – males comprise more than 70 percent of the field. However, in the only high-earning category in which women hold a majority of positions – professional health diagnosing and treating practitioners, where women account for 70 percent of job holders – Oregon women still earn only 64 cents to every dollar of their male counterparts.

Pay Inequality in Oregon highlights major contributors to pay inequality, including work-life barriers, educational factors including disparities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) related study, and workplace bias and discrimination. Expensive and inadequate child care, the difficulty of caring for a sick child or family member, or the inability to take time off for a student's school-related activity all contribute to barriers for women and working families.

The report notes that more than 60 percent of minimum wage workers in Oregon are women, disproportionately women of color.

The report's policy recommendations include:

* Public outreach and awareness: Invest in technical assistance for employers

* Educational and occupational initiatives: Increase access to career training for women and people of color; encourage more diverse representation in STEM fields

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> *-- Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian*

* Workplace best practices: Create a toolkit for employers to use to achieve equal pay; develop an award program for employers that are leading their sectors

* Legislative: Implement family–friendly policies that support working parents and caregivers; create new protections against retaliation and discrimination; expand child tax care credits

The Council's work comes as national attention from The Shriver Report, released earlier this month, underscores the need for the nation "to modernize its relationship with women." The Shriver Report estimates that closing the wage gap between men and women would cut poverty in half and add nearly half a trillion dollars to the national economy.

"Closing the wage gap will be good for Oregon's economy," said Cheryl Collins, Vice President of Organizational Development at Ninkasi Brewing Company. "The companies that are leading the way on equal pay for equal work understand that flexible and fair workplaces help attract and retain top talent."

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