

Dept. of Workforce Development: Women at Work webinar celebrates working women

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MADISON – Women leading state agencies in Gov. Tony Evers' administration celebrated working women statewide Tuesday, highlighting the crucial role women play in Wisconsin's growing economy as well as state agency efforts to reduce employment barriers and advance all workers. The hourlong webinar, Forward Wisconsin: Women at Work, marked International Women's Day on March 8 and March as Women's History Month.

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"Wisconsin women participate in the labor force at a rate greater than the national average and make critical contributions across all industries and occupations," Department of Workforce Development Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek said. "Important progress also is being made to close the earnings gap Wisconsin women experience. To continue this progress and reduce employment barriers that affect all workers, DWD proudly joins with other agencies as well as public and private partners to implement the Evers' Administration's innovative and historic workforce development initiatives."

In addition to Pechacek, the Forward Wisconsin: Women at Work webinar featured: Department of Administration Secretary-designee Kathy Blumenfeld; Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. CEO and Secretary Missy Hughes; Department of Children and Families Secretary Emilie Amundson; Department of Safety and Professional Services Secretary Dawn Crim; and DWD Bureau of Workforce Information and Technical Support Deputy Director Heather Thompson.

Among the key statistics shared by DWD during the webinar, Wisconsin women:

- Nearly equal men in the workforce, accounting for 47% of the workforce last year;
- Exceed the national labor force participation rate by 5 to 7 percentage points year after year;
- In 2020, Wisconsin women who were full-time wage and salary workers had median usual weekly earnings of \$885, or 86.5% of the \$1,023 median usual weekly earnings of their male counterparts. This has increased from 82.4% in 2019, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. While Wisconsin's overall wage rate is slightly lower than the national average, state women appear about 4.2 percentage points closer to achieving pay parity than the national average.
- Continue to experience some challenges and barriers that prevent them and all workers from achieving their employment potential. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Pulse Survey, during the four weeks ending Feb. 7, more than 36,000 Wisconsin women cut their hours and more than 5,500 quit their jobs due to lack of childcare. Meanwhile, more than 16,000 men also reported trying to both work at home and care for children.

DOA's Blumenfeld pointed to the importance of the administration's historic investments in workforce development and education as well as efforts to connect the dots through improved access to housing, health care and social services. Support for women-owned businesses and entrepreneurs also are administration priorities.

"There is much more we can do to not only help women get back to the workforce, and to get equal pay, but to get into leadership roles too," Blumenfeld said. "This work is personally important to me and it's critical for the state as whole."

Addressing women entrepreneurs, Blumenfeld said, "You are our future. You have and continue to be the bedrock of our state's economy. You are amazing role models for young women to follow, to see and to aspire to greatness. Know that you are valued and appreciated by Governor Evers and all of us here today. Because when women succeed, we all succeed."

WEDC Secretary and CEO Hughes noted that funding for women-owned start-ups and women entrepreneurs continues to lag behind male-led businesses, both nationally and in Wisconsin. WEDC is providing both financial and technical

assistance to women-owned start-ups, and is working with private sector investors to increase their financial commitments.

Hughes noted that one bright spot is the number of women-owned small businesses in Wisconsin communities. A recent WEDC survey of the state's 34 Main Street communities found that 51% of small businesses were either fully or jointly owned by women. Hughes said based on her recent visits to new businesses opening with WEDC's Main Street Bounceback grants, those numbers will likely continue to grow.

DCF's Amundson pointed to Wisconsin's long history of women leaders and transformative investments the state is making to reduce barriers for the future.

"From the Ho-Chunk and Menominee tribes, who were the first women to set foot on Wisconsin soil, to Vel Phillips, Gerda Lerner, and Dorothy Walker, there have been countless women who have made an impact on our state and the nation," Amundson said. "Thanks to their dedication and advocacy, our state has a strong foundation that we continue to build upon today. Governor Evers has made an unprecedented investment of over \$824 million in early care and education. This transformative investment has provided us an opportunity to build a childcare system that works for all families and supports a thriving economy."

Crim, of DSPS, emphasized the need to address workforce issues facing women of color and credited efforts by industry leaders to encourage women in nontraditional fields.

"We need to acknowledge how all of the inequities women face and all of the inequities Black people face are exponentially greater for Black women," Crim said. "At our agency, we work closely with industries and individuals to license plumbers, engineers and electricians and administer trades exams that lead to licensure and family supporting jobs. We appreciate the efforts of leaders in those fields to bring more women and people of color into the workforce. We have a long way to go, but we are on the right path."

Governor Evers' cabinet includes five more women, ten of 16 cabinet posts in all, making this administration one of the most diverse and inclusive in Wisconsin history. The others are Rebecca Cameron Valcq, chairperson, Public Service Commission; Karen Timberlake, secretary-designee, Department of Health Services; Cheryl Olson-Collins, secretary-designee, Department of Financial Institutions; Anne Sayers, secretary-designee, Department of Tourism, and Mary M. Kolar, secretary,

Department of Veterans